

THE APOSTATE

Cloistered from infancy in a Capadocian monastery, young Julian reached manhood without any inkling of his true birthright.

Then one day he learned that far from being a poor monk, he was a prince, and heir to the throne of the Roman Empire.

How Julian the Brother became Julian the Apostate and then Julianus the Emperor emerges as one of the strangest and most exciting stories in western history.

“Battles that can actually be followed and understood, intrigue and treachery of the most appalling order . . .”

—*New York Herald Tribune*

IMPERIAL RENEGADE

Louis de Wohl



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PART ONE

A.D. 348-351

CHAPTER I

"We must be very near now," said Mardonius.

Hiempsal gave him a searching look. His master was very heavily built and he should have been tired from the long ride, but he was not. He seemed almost as fresh as when they had set out in the early afternoon, and there was a strange gleam in his eyes.

Hiempsal was even heavier, and, but for the fact that his was the smaller horse, he would have towered over the squat, fat figure of his master. His origin was something of a mystery. Some said that Mardonius had bought him in Cyrene and that he was a Targi from an oasis deep down in the South; others that he came from a place near the heart of Africa, where the very Nile itself was in its youth, a tiny creek. He was of Herculean strength—the Emperor himself might well be envious of such a bodyguard.

"Very near, says the Master," muttered Hiempsal. "It's not too soon, either. These so-called horses are at the end of their strength. Look at the foam! A few more hours and they'd drop dead. But, then, they are not really horses. There are no horses in Cappadocia. There are only rabbits—and dust—and bad roads—and mountains. It is a country that the gods have forgotten—the saints, I should have said. What are we here for, Master?"

There was a thin smile on Mardonius' face.

No slave, except Hiempsal, would dare to speak to him, without first being spoken to, let alone ask questions. For lesser crimes than that others had spent long stretches of their wretched lives in the ergastulum, the slave prison, working in the fields by day, chained to the block by night.

But that rascal Hiempsal seemed to know always exactly how far he could go. He knew also that his master would not do anything that was likely to diminish his value as a bodyguard.

And this was a lonely journey. . . .

"We are on the quest of quests, Hiempsal," said Mar-

donius, "never was a journey as important as this one. They baptised you, didn't they?"

"I should think they did," muttered the giant slave. "I was thirteen or fourteen, then. They pushed me into the water and murmured their spells."

He murmured something to himself. If it was a spell, it was hardly a friendly one.

Again Mardonius smiled. "Then they must have told you the story of the Nativity: how the three Magi set out to find the King of Kings. Well, Hiempsal—I am the three Magi rolled into one. I am the Thrice Holy One, and, perhaps, I too have a star to show me the way."

Hiempsal's dark face showed bewilderment, but he knew that it wasn't safe to go on asking questions now.

Silently they rode on. The dusty road wound higher and higher. The sun was low now, in an hour, if that, darkness would descend on the thin forest of acacias, cedars and cypresses.

On the right, beyond the first trees, a thin wisp of blueish smoke arose.

A girl hustled across the road, and Hiempsal, at a sign from his master, spurred his horse and caught her just as she was diving into the bushes.

When Mardonius rode up she was wriggling like a wildcat in Hiempsal's brown arms. She was a young woman, not a girl, sixteen or seventeen, with full breasts and smouldering eyes. She was poorly dressed.

"Steady, steady, you brute," said Mardonius impassively, "you'll frighten the wits out of her." Then, to the woman: "Don't be frightened. Here's a denarius for you. Just tell me how far it is to Macellum. How many leagues; two? A little more? Two and a half? Very well, here's your coin. Let her go, Hiempsal."

The giant obeyed, not without regret.

As they rode on, he turned his head once or twice, licking his chops.

"Don't behave like an animal," said Mardonius angrily. "Have you never seen breasts before? The plague on you. Listen—we're going to spend the next few days, and maybe weeks, at a monastery. I want no complaints from my hosts about my servant. If there is a complaint, by Hecate, you'll get a hundred lashes when we are back in Nicomedia."

"A man's a man, Master," stammered the brown giant.

It was supposed to be an apology.

But Mardonius turned round with the sudden movement of the viper about to strike, his sallow face a set mask, the small dark eyes mere slits.

"Down—dog!"

Too late Hiempsal saw that he had said the one thing that was deadly offence to his master. He paled and his huge body began to quiver.

With a tremendous effort he forced himself to dismount, then fell flat on his belly in abject prostration.

"I am the Master's dog," he whimpered.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw Mardonius' hand, flabby and womanish; there was a short, sharp dagger in it.

For a second or two death hung in the air. . . .

Then the dagger disappeared in the wide folds of the cloak from which it had come.

"Get up—*man!*" said Mardonius contemptuously. He spat the word like an insult. "We'll see about you at a more suitable time."

Slowly Hiempsal rose and remounted. When he was able to give his horse the spur, the eunuch was already far ahead of him. Mardonius' face had regained its usual expression of benign imperturbability. Many of his Eastern friends had commented on his likeness to some of the statues of Buddha, huge, rounded and gentle. The ivory dome of his forehead was half covered by a kerchief of Chinese silk. A simple cloak of honey-coloured wool hung in loose folds around the unwieldy body that might have belonged to a woman in her fifties. The cloak bore no insignia of rank and was dusty from the long ride.

It was difficult to say anything at all definite about this man, his nationality, age, rank, habits or profession.

He was of Eastern extraction, undoubtedly. Egyptian, Syrian, Chaldean blood might have produced this mixture.

Two generations ago he might have been taken for a wandering priest of one of those strange godheads from the banks of the Euphrates or the Nile. But this was impossible now that the Emperor Constantine had closed the pagan temples—and this measure had become even more strict under his successor, Constantius.

One thing was certain, there was strength in this fleshy, almost formless body, and even more in the mind ruling it. A rare thing for a eunuch.

As he rode on, higher and higher up the white road, he looked from a distance not unlike a giant wasp, hurriedly crawling up a branch of white flowers.

Not once did he look back. He seemed quite unconcerned about Hiempsal, whom he had only just threatened with death. There was no reason to be concerned. The law permitted the owner to kill a slave whenever he thought fit to do so, and this had been so for many centuries.

To kill a slave was as small a matter as to kill a chicken.

Very rarely it happened that a desperate slave tried to resist—and not many tried to escape. Too terrible, too cruel was the punishment for such crimes. It was easier to die under the lash than on the cross.

Besides, the chances of escape were very small—especially without money. And a slave hardly ever had money, except when he was in a confidential position. But even for a man of means it was not easy to escape, once he had been denounced to the police.

The police were omnipresent in the Empire, both in uniform and in plain clothes. They were watching the ports, the ships, the rest places and inns, the streets of the cities and towns, and the highroads. The badge of a police official made it the duty of all soldiers to assist him, when he required it.

Grave punishment threatened anybody harbouring an escaping criminal, especially a slave. And a slave was easily recognisable by the slit in his ear.

Only once in the whole history of the Roman Empire had the slaves mutinied. It had taken a regular general a serious campaign to hunt them down.

That was more than four hundred years ago and ever since the Empire had taken no chances.

From Britain in the West to the very frontiers of Persia in the East—from the banks of the Rhine and the Danube in the North to the great desert and the mud huts the Nubians in Africa, there was no escape for a slave who killed or fled from his master.

Thus it was very unlikely that Hiempsal was going to do anything desperate, although he knew his master well enough to be certain that he had not spared him out of mercy, and that his punishment was as certain as the sunset over there, beyond the treetops.

On the right rose now the wild peaks of Arghi Dagh, naked stone, glistening red under the last tired rays.

Just beyond a small valley, perched on top of a plateau were a few hundred white houses, quadrangular, artless, crude—the little town of Macellum.

CHAPTER II

Two and two—and two and two—two and two, . . .

A long double column of monks was marching in a narrow circle round the small courtyard innocent of either flower or tree. In their garb of grey cloth held together by a triple

cord, and with their little grey caps, they looked like living stones moving slowly over those already dead.

Not a word was spoken on their dreary march. Their eyes were fixed on the ground. Even so, never the same two were allowed to march together. The link of friendship was not encouraged; it interfered with the complete detachment that alone enabled the mind to meditate.

Old faces and young, strong faces and weak, features showing calm, resignation, profound wisdom, glowing zeal . . . Thin lips and full, all murmuring prayers.

From a small balcony on the upper floor of the main building two men were watching the column.

One with a face as wrinkled as old parchment. A few wisps of white hair showed under the skull cap.

Thomas, the Abbot, was said to be almost a hundred years old.

There was a rumour among the simple people that he was older still, that he had been known to the oldest villagers as a very, very old man when they had been children; in fact, some believed that for the sake of his great holiness he had been granted the grace of living the span of seven full lives, and that in his early youth he had known the Apostle Paul personally.

There were others who maintained that he himself had spread that rumour, in order to make simpletons believe in his holiness and to ensure rich gifts for his monastery.

But then, everybody knew that there were a good many people about who still secretly sacrificed to Jupiter and Athene and especially to Cybele, mother of the gods, and they never tired of saying evil things against the worshippers of the Crucified One.

Abbot Thomas was leaning heavily on the right arm of a tall, strongly built monk in his fifties. A man with the neck of a bull and the arms and shoulders of a wrestler.

Deacon Perditus had actually been a wrestler in the arena, before he became a Christian and a monk.

Fifteen years ago, when Kilikian bandits had tried to assault the monastery, just after the feast of St. Paul, its patron saint, Deacon—then Subdeacon—Perditus had held the door against them for five solid hours, swinging a seven-foot club as though it had been a riding crop and bashing in one Kilikian skull after another.

When the bandits finally withdrew—troops were coming up at last from the nearest garrison—Subdeacon Perditus was bleeding from many wounds and that had proved to be his only comfort for many weeks to come.

He was deeply upset—not so much about having had to

fight—for did he not defend St. Paul's property?—but about the fact that he had thoroughly enjoyed fighting.

His wounds at least gave him the opportunity of acquiring merit through suffering, but he thought them by no means an adequate punishment for the unholy joy of the old Adam in him.

The tired old eyes of the Abbot studied face after face as the monks passed by. There were six young men at the end of the column who had not yet taken any vows.

The youngest of them was a frail youth of no more than seventeen years, pale, with dark, dreamy eyes.

His gait was awkward and most of the time he seemed to be out of step with his partner.

"How do you get on with Brother Julian, Deacon Perditus?"

The tall monk smiled a trifle acidly.

"He is very young, Most Reverend Father—and a bit confused in his ideas. Yesterday he asked me how it could be that God had created evil."

"He did—did he?" asked the Abbot.

"I told him, of course, that God had done no such thing, so he said, 'But surely, if God is the Creator of the universe—of the whole universe!—in which there is evil as well as good, He must have created evil.'"

"And when you reminded him of the fall of Lucifer and the fall of man . . ."

Deacon Perditus looked up in surprise.

"How did you know, Most Reverend Father? That is exactly what I did remind him of."

"I know. I know. But he, what did he say?"

"Oh—something silly; that Lucifer and Adam had fallen was due to their will, and their will, as everything else, came from God. Therefore the will to evil came from God."

"Aristotle might have liked that one," chuckled the old Abbot.

"I didn't like it," said Perditus, not without a tinge of bitterness.

"It's sheer dialectics, my dear Deacon, the way they are mouthing it in Ephesus and Corinth and Athens, thinking they can cheat their consciences by blaming it all on the Lord. What did you say?"

"I told him to get a little more physical exercise in the morning, Most Reverend Father. He is a sparrow of a boy really, with his thin chest and his pointed chin. I'm sure his digestion is not functioning properly. A bit more exercise, and there will be less dialectics."

Again the Abbot chuckled.

"I wish you could give that recipe of yours to some of our most learned deacons, presbyters and bishops—yes, and bishops. They have been overdoing the dialectical part a little, lately. Quarrelling a lot about the most intricate things, and publicly, too. Had a letter only three days ago—"

But here he checked himself. It was no good telling the good Deacon about such things. He wouldn't understand.

"I suppose I shall have to talk to the boy seriously one of these days," sighed Deacon Perditus. "Quite frankly I am not at all sure whether we are making a good job of him. I don't know whether he has the vocation for priesthood. A good priest, I mean. Can't think of anything worse than a bad one, either. But what will become of him then? He has no family, as far as I know."

"No, no,"-said the Abbot quickly. "He has no family. But Bishop Eusebius of Nicomedia has always been very good to the poor little orphan. Maybe he could—"

"The Most Reverend Bishop Eusebius died seven years ago," reminded the Deacon discreetly. Whether a hundred or four hundred years of age, Abbot Thomas had been getting very old lately.

"Died? So he did—so he did: quite. They all die, one after the other. May his soul rest in peace."

The old man made the sign of the cross and Deacon Perditus instinctively did the same.

"It will be most unfortunate if we can't make a good priest out of the boy," said the Abbot earnestly. "You yourself said that he was just young. We mustn't acknowledge defeat too easily."

The tall Deacon stiffened visibly, he seemed to grow still taller. The mild reproof of his superior had reawakened the old instinct of his wrestling days, the instincts that had made him swing a seven-foot club against the Kilikian bandits fifteen years ago.

"Certainly, I shall spare no effort, Most Reverend Father. But the boy is a dreamer, vain, and sometimes obstinate. He has a mind of his own and I am not sure whether it is the mind of a priest. It is most significant, really, that we are discussing him out of all the rest, the youngest and the least worthy of the community."

"The last shall be the first, my dear Deacon," murmured the old man with a wistful little smile. But he added quickly: "Not that this must necessarily refer to Brother Julian. Perhaps I should sound him myself on his dialectic activities one of these days. We shall see.—What is this noise?"

"Visitors," said the Deacon. From his height he could see the corner of the outer courtyard, where two men on horseback were speaking to the Brother Doorkeeper.

"Visitors?" The abbot's almost hairless brows puckered. "These are troubled times, my dear Deacon. I do not like visitors. How many are there? Can you see them?"

"Only two, Most Reverend Father. One seems to be an African servant. The other is a fat man—I can't see his face. Their horses are not very good and they seem tired. Shall I enquire?"

"No," said the Abbot firmly. "If it is a matter of importance, I shall be informed anyway. Lead me back to my study."

CHAPTER III

When the Abbot entered his study, still leaning on the Deacon's arm, he found one of the two visitors already waiting for him—a fat man—no, a eunuch.

What could have induced the Brother Doorkeeper to make such a stupid mistake? Surely he must know that visitors . . .

"I bid you a blessed evening, Most Reverend Father," said Mardonius in his suave silky voice, a voice deep for a woman, but very high for a man. "My name is Boretius. You will, I hope, forgive the zeal of your serving brother, who, on my special request, has led me straight to your study."

The Abbot understood now why the Brother Doorkeeper had disobeyed the rule. There was something irresistibly cogent about the visitor's eyes. The suave tongue might speak words of honeyed politeness, but the eyes commanded, and they were not accustomed to being disobeyed.

"I may be forgiven, Most Reverend Father, if I add another wish? May I speak to you alone?"

The old man hesitated—but only for a moment. Then he went over to the heavy chair behind his desk and sat down. A brief nod dismissed Deacon Perditus who left the room not too willingly and with a puzzled expression on his huge face.

"I thank you, Most Reverend Father," said the eunuch, cautiously establishing himself on the small hard chair opposite the desk—"and I apologise for what must appear to be a regrettable lack of formality. Unfortunately I had no choice. My orders are to make my visit to you a matter of the strictest secrecy."

"Your orders?"

"I am Third Chamberlain of His Imperial Majesty, the Emperor Constantius—" the eunuch bowed and added the formula of the Court: "to whom may God grant victory and a long blessed life."

"Amen," said the Abbot somewhat uneasily. "Amen. Amen. I take it you have a letter for me from the *Præpositus Sacri Cubiculi*?"

"No, Most Reverend Father. I carry credentials still higher than that. The *Præpositus* has remained in Constantinople. I come from Imperial Headquarters in Antioch—that is to say, it was in Antioch when I left. The Emperor is by now in Persia, at the head of the finest army the Empire has ever seen."

"Wars, always wars," said Abbot Thomas.

"Other rulers," pursued the eunuch, "may forget the ties of family, when it comes to the more urgent affairs of the State. Not so the Emperor. That is why I am here, Most Reverend Father."

The old Abbot sat up in his chair.

"The ties of family?" he asked expectantly. "What do you mean? How can your visit to my poor monastery have any connection with the Emperor's family?"

The eunuch smiled politely.

"There is the most direct connection, Most Reverend Father. A member of the Imperial family, Prince Julian, is living under this very roof."

There was a long pause.

The Abbot did not bat an eyelid. He looked like a waxen image.

The eunuch, too, sat in silence. Even the sharpest observer could have seen no sign of the tremendous, the breathtaking excitement that filled him. It seemed hours until the Abbot spoke at last.

"The Emperor must have great confidence in you—I am sorry, but I did not catch your name?"

"Boretius."

"Not many people know—or think they know—that there is such a person as Prince Julian."

"No, Most Reverend Father, outside this monastery no more than you can count on the fingers of one hand."

The Abbot rubbed his leaky old eyes.

"You must understand, Boretius, that I do not commit myself about the existence of the young man even now. Perhaps he exists—perhaps he doesn't. This monastery is under the special protection of St. Paul—and of the garrison of Macellum. There is a garrison at Macellum, you know—"

"Half a cohort of the Sixteenth legion, under the com-

mand of Lucius Priscus," nodded the eunuch. "My orders are to summon them in certain circumstances, which, however, are not likely to arise."

They both smiled now after having threatened each other with exactly the same weapon.

"Proof," said the Abbot, still smiling. "Unmistakable proof, Boretius, that you are really what you say you are. Proof in writing, not in words. I must have proof."

"Certainly, Most Reverend Father—here is the Emperor's own seal, his hand-seal—will that suffice for the present?"

The gnarled old hands took the golden capsula almost avidly.

"Yes, yes—the Emperor's hand-seal. Very good, Boretius, very good—"

The eunuch leaned forward.

"As I said before, there are not more than five people outside this monastery who know about Prince Julian's existence. But how many are there *inside* this monastery who know?"

The Abbot giggled. "At present—two, my Boretius. You and I."

The eunuch's eyes searched his face.

"Three, you mean, don't you, Most Reverend Father? You, and I—and Prince Julian himself?"

The Abbot cackled with laughter. "Heheehee—not at all. When I say two, I mean two. Prince Julian knows nothing about his rank, nothing about his parents. He thinks he is an orphan—and so he is, poor little mite, so he is—to some extent. His father, at least, is dead. I don't know about the mother. Do you?"

"He does not know? You are quite sure of that?"

"Quite sure. You know, of course, that Bishop Eusebius of Nicomedia brought the boy to me ten years ago. This monastery does not belong to his diocese, but he was a very great man throughout this Empire. He insisted that the boy must not be told anything about the past. In his own interest, of course; no good putting ideas into his head."

"Of course not." The eunuch smiled.

There was a faint scratching noise at the door. The Abbot clapped his hands and a monk came in with an oil-lamp, which he placed on the desk. He then bowed respectfully and left, as silently as he had come.

Only then did the two men realise that it had been getting dark. For a while they just sat studying each other's face.

Ambitious, thought Abbot Thomas. Very. As deep as the sea. Not the usual type of Court eunuch, scheming a little, intriguing a little. A dangerous man. We must be careful, hand-seal or no hand-seal.

Very old, but still not asleep, thought the eunuch. Perhaps this is a health-preserving climate. Some of these provincial abbots have far better brains than their more successful colleagues in Constantinople or Rome. I am not exactly popular so far. No wonder—he senses danger, the old owl.

A thin bell rang and kept on ringing.

"Supper is served in the refectory," said the Abbot. "You must be hungry, Boretius—"

"Not very. Unless I am keeping you from having your supper—"

The old man shook his head. "What little I eat, I have here in my study. It makes me feel sick to see seventy-six men wolfing mountains of food."

"In that case, if you will allow me to go on with what I have to say?"

"Naturally"—the Abbot blinked—"I do hope that you are not bringing troublesome news into this peaceful house, Boretius. Bishop Eusebius instructed me to try my best to make a good priest out of—the boy in question. These instructions I have followed with great care."

"Successfully, I am sure?" asked the eunuch politely.

"To some extent, Boretius, to some extent. He is very young, of course, only seventeen—and very impressionable." (Why does that interest him? There was a flame in his eyes for a brief moment.) "Has the Emperor new plans?"

"The Emperor has not made up his mind yet," said the eunuch slowly. "He will do so on the basis of my report."

He has not come to murder the boy, then, thought the Abbot. But what is he up to? The Emperor is still childless. Can it be—no, it is impossible. He would not dare to do *that*, after what he has done before.

"My orders, Most Reverend Father, are to keep the young Prince under observation, until I can form my own judgment. A way will have to be found to enable me to talk to him freely about various subjects."

"But he knows next to nothing about must subjects, Boretius."

"That, Most Reverend Father, is hardly a fitting description of the mind of a priest of the Lord, is it?"

"He is not yet a priest, he is a boy. He has been an acolyte at Mass. What do you expect at seventeen?"

"I have not come to find out how much he knows. I have come to see what kind of a boy he is, and with all due respect to your wisdom, Most Reverend Father, I must insist on getting first-hand knowledge. I suggest that I shall be given, shall we say, a temporary tutorship? I am not asking you to release

him from whatever duties he may have—all I want is a few hours with him every day, for a week—or two."

"I see," said the Abbot. He felt very weary and empty. There was something about this man Boretius that exhausted him. It was not so much the feeling of being in the presence of an incomplete human being, not man and not woman, although many sensitive people could never overcome that feeling; it was a strange force, a sort of pull, that emanated from Boretius and grew stronger and stronger the longer one was in his company. "An hour more of this," thought the Abbot, "and I shall feel that all my innards are being drawn out of me, as is supposed to happen when a woman is hung. I am not a woman. I am an old man, a very old man, but still more of a man than this creature here. . . ."

He made a mental effort.

"Do you intend to reveal to the boy who he is?"

"By all the saints, no, not even a hint of it. I quite realise your difficulty: the procedure is unusual within the rules and regulations of a monastery. But I have at present no intention of making the boy leave here."

He paused for a moment, but there was no reaction in the waxen face of the old man.

"Later, perhaps," added the eunuch. "Not yet. Now this is what I suggest: the late Bishop Eusebius—"

"May his soul rest in peace," said the Abbot.

"Er—amen," said the eunuch. "The late Bishop always took a fatherly interest in the young orphan. He decided that when the boy reached a certain age—the age of seventeen—teachers both spiritual and otherwise should look after him, in view of his future development."

"I understand," said the Abbot. "This would make your visit appear entirely unofficial."

"Exactly. And that is what you want, isn't it? In that way there would be no interference with the regulations, no unnecessary sensation would be caused among the rest of your flock."

That is what *you* want, thought the Abbot. But why, why do you want it? . . .

"Very good," he said aloud. "I suppose you would like to see the boy now."

He rang a hand-bell. To the serving brother who entered, he said: "Bring Brother Julian to the study, Brother Timothy."

The two men waited in silence. In vain the experienced old eyes of the Abbot searched and searched. The face of the eunuch was calm and unperturbed. There was no outward

sign of what he felt—if he felt anything. His breath came even and controlled.

But then, Abbot Thomas did not know that this man had been an adept of yoga for more than twenty years and that he had control over his body which few men could hope to achieve.

This was the moment he had been waiting for, working for, searching for all these years. This was the end of the quest; the quest of quests.

Steps outside—uneven, timid, halting steps—and yet the march of destiny, the march of history.

When the door opened, a slim boyish figure was visible like a shadow in the dim light of the corridor.

"Come in, Brother Julian," said the Abbot pleasantly.

The boyish monk advanced, closed the door, somewhat awkwardly marched towards the desk of his superior. At a distance of three yards he halted and bowed, his eyes down-cast.

Like the serving brother, he had not, so far, uttered a single word.

The eunuch's eyes fastened on the boy, as though they wanted to pierce his thin body in a hundred different places.

Thin. Thin face. Can't see the eyes. Doesn't seem a strong face. Longish nose, a little too pointed. Small chin, no beard yet. Half a child. Good forehead. Noble forehead. If only he would look up and one could see his eyes.

"Brother Julian," said the Abbot, "you remember, of course, your late benefactor and guardian, Bishop Eusebius of Nicomedia—"

"Whose soul may God rest in peace," said the young monk warmly.

"Amen," said both Abbot and eunuch.

"Not content with being your guardian while he was alive, he has provided means to help you after his death."

While listening deferentially the young monk could not help letting his eyes wander towards the Abbot's silent visitor.

Dark eyes. Soft and dreamy like a girl's. *Her* eyes, the eunuch thought, unmistakably her eyes. . . .

"Boretius here," said the Abbot, "has come on business. During the next few days he will converse with you about various subjects. I shall instruct Deacon Perditus to give you free time."

The young monk bowed. A faint colour had crept into his pale cheeks in which the bones stood out.

"We shall start to-morrow morning, two hours after sunrise," said the eunuch. "It will be something of a change for you, I suppose."

"That is all, Brother Julian," said the Abbot graciously. "You may go back to your supper now."

When the young monk had withdrawn, the eunuch rose.

"Thank you, Most Reverend Father—the story of the last will of the late Bishop came as easily to your lips as if it were Gospel truth. No, do not be angry with me—I admired you for it. And now permit me too, to retire for the night. I have had a long ride, and seven hours in the saddle is a strain for a heavy man."

The Abbot rose too and rang the hand-bell. He said quietly:

"I did not speak a word of untruth. The Bishop—God bless his memory and soul—*has* left us means for the boy, and you are here on business—although I am not at all certain what it is."

"It is the Emperor's business," said the eunuch haughtily. "I bid you good night, Most Reverend Father."

The serving brother entered.

"Show our guest to his room, Brother Timothy, and see that he has all he needs. Good night, Boretius."

When, after a while, the serving brother returned to the study, he found the old Abbot slumped in his chair. The heavy head, dropping, very nearly touched the desk.

"You are not well, Most Reverend Father?" asked Brother Timothy terrified.

The Abbot grunted.

"Nonsense—nonsense—draw the curtains back—the air is foul in this room. Preposterous: can't breathe."

He wheezed. He shook off the monk's anxious fingers.

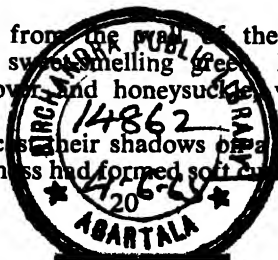
"Don't need any help. I'm quite all right. Just foul air: befouled air. This is an evil world, Brother Timothy. What did the Lord die for? I wonder—was it worth it? Can you smell sulphur, Brother Timothy? I can. Go away now. You are not evil—only stupid. Go away."

Brother Timothy went. There was no doubt, the Abbot was getting very old—very old indeed.

CHAPTER IV

A stone's throw from the walls of the monastery were meadows, luscious, sweet-smelling green, lavishly sprinkled with thyme and clover and honeysuckle, with even an occasional narcissus.

Groups of pines cast their shadows on a number of erratic boulders, on which moss had formed soft cushions.



"There must be a spring somewhere," said Boretius. "The soil is so fresh and the grass is glossy with water. Surely there must be a spring somewhere very near."

The young monk nodded.

"There is, Sir. It runs many feet under ground—just under these stones here, and it ends over there, in the courtyard: we get our drinking water from it. It is pure and very cold."

"Like the truth," nodded Boretius.

Brother Julian looked up quickly: "Oh, but surely the truth is not cold. Christ Himself—" and he crossed himself hastily—"Christ Himself is the Truth. He said so. And is there anything warmer, anything more ardent than His love? No, no, truth could not be cold. If I thought for a moment—"

He broke off with a timid smile. "I am talking too much," he apologised. "Please forgive me, Sir."

"But I want you to talk, Brother Julian," said the eunuch pleasantly. "We are not in the monastery now, although it is still there—if we look back. So truth is not cold, you mean. Let us see. What *is* truth?"

The young monk frowned.

"Pontius Pilate asked that—the executioner of the Lord."

The eunuch smiled. "And Pontius Pilate was quite right to ask that. When a man is wrong in one thing he need not, for that, be wrong in all things. It's no good using a word without knowing its sense. What then is the meaning of the word 'truth'?"

"Reality, I should say," said Julian after a while. "Yes—that is what it must be. Reality. Truth is what *is*. It can never be what *is not*. Therefore it must be Reality."

"Well said. You can think, Julian," nodded the eunuch and he saw with keen appreciation a faint flush of satisfaction creeping into the boy's lean cheeks. "Very well said. But you, yourself, are you not real?"

"Oh yes—I have heard of that school of so-called philosophers who pretend that nothing is real except themselves. What a fallacy!—Surely the very fact that more than one of them believe it, is proof against the theory."

"Well said again," said the eunuch. "You are a good dialectician—"

This time Julian beamed with pleasure.

"—for a monk," added Boretius. "But then, the dialectics of monks must necessarily be rather limited. They are not allowed to think, really—"

"Oh, but we do!" protested the boy. "Of course, we can't spend too much time on it. Faith is so much more important."

He sighed. Yes—it was quite distinctly a sigh.

“—because if monks would really think—” Boretius went on, as though there had been no protest—“they would come to rather awkward conclusions sometimes. You, friend Julian, have just defined truth as reality. You then admitted that you yourself are real. Therefore you, too, are true—you too are the Truth, and not only Christ.”

“I—I did not—I had no intention of comparing—” stammered Julian.

Boretius laughed at his embarrassment.

“In philosophy you must learn to have the courage to think, my boy, and it is just that courage which monks do not possess. They are always afraid of treading on someone’s toes. Of course, you are real, and I am real and this stone I am sitting on is real—and therefore true. All creation is real, is true. But when Christ said, ‘I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life’—did he not omit something in this definition of himself? Something—important?”

Julian fixed his eyes earnestly on the large benevolent face. Their eyes met, the dark dreamy eyes of the boy, feminine almost in their velvety softness, and the deep black eyes of the eunuch, sparkling with intelligence in their shadowy caves.

“What has He—what could He have omitted?”

“Beauty, Julian,” said Boretius, and there was something like a deep longing in his smooth voice.

“Beauty. The perfect harmony of form. Have you ever seen a statue of Praxiteles? of Pheidias? Have you seen the Acropolis in immortal Athens? The curve of a myrrhine vase? The smile of a beautiful woman? No, do not frown, my friend. There is no harm done to the spirit by such a smile—except if the harm is already in your own mind.”

“There are some who teach that woman was created by Satan,” said Julian gravely. “The theory has been condemned as heresy by the Church. It contradicts Genesis. But woman was the first to succumb to Satan—”

“Yes—” a subtle smile was hovering on the thin lips of the older man. “She would be the first. Women are curious.”

“I know nothing about them,” said Julian coldly.

“And you are afraid to learn, I suppose,” nodded Boretius, rubbing his sleek hairless chin. “Yes, knowledge demands courage, and if you have reason to distrust your own strength, if you are fearful and weak—”

“But I am not.” It came like an explosion in its sudden vehemence. “I am not without courage, I assure you. I am not afraid of knowledge; on the contrary, I want to know, I am burning to know. I would give—”

He broke off under Boretius' ironic smile.

"I am sorry," he murmured. "What must you think of me, Sir. Such presumption—the Reverend Deacon told me only the other day; I am proud. The worst sin of all! And he is right, I know he is. I *am* proud. It is terrible to see the working of Satan in one's own mind."

"Pride," said Boretius calmly, "has two faces like most things. One is evil, but the other is good—and necessary. A man without pride is as contemptible as a man without honour. Keep your pride married to your honour, and all is well. With all due respect to the good Deacon, of course—" the ironic smile was withering—"I know all about his exploits in the arena and against Kilikian bandits. He is a brave man—physically. But when it comes to intellectual decisions, a club is hardly a suitable weapon. And as for the Most Reverend Abbot, he is just a trifle old. I doubt whether he can stand up to the force of your dialectics even now, untrained as they are. He would have to save himself by invoking the brute force of authority. One could hardly call that winning an argument. I am afraid, my friend Julian, you are a bit too intelligent for your monastery—that is what is wrong with you."

It is clumsy flattery, he thought. But he seems to have a good stomach for flattery. He is blushing again, by Hecate! We can make a stronger attack.

"It would be a pity," he said, "if your intellect did not get suitable training. A man like you can't live on the poor crumbs of knowledge that he can get in this wretched place. Look at it! Drab walls, a courtyard without a single flower, all stone and dust and solitude; and look at this bit of land here: here *is* beauty, outside the man-built walls. Here is the world—here it begins, that immense wealth created by—by the godhead. Can it be sinful to prefer His creation to man's?"

"No, but—"

Again their eyes met, this time in silent duel.

"Here it begins, I said, Julian. But what do you know about it? Do you remember, pious Christian, the parable of the talents? What are you doing with the talent you have received? You are burying it like the bad servant in the story. You are letting it rot within a narrow heap of stone called a monastery, among simpletons in monkish garb; you endure surveyance by superiors, who are already afraid of your higher intellect—admit that they do not know what to do with you; that they feel even in their poor minds that you are cut from a different tree than themselves. Don't you feel it yourself? How much have you got in common with them?"

What can they teach you, that you could not learn without them? And here you want to stay for the rest of your life, banished between four grey walls, buried with your talent. Is it that for which you were created, Julian?"

"I—I am not sure that I should listen to you," stammered the young monk. "You are—you are tempting me, like—"

"Macellum lies fairly high," smiled the eunuch. "But it can hardly be called 'an exceeding high mountain.' Although I am at a loss to conceive where Satan got that sort of mountain from in the Holy Land, where the highest mountain is a molehill. What a comparison, my Julian! It is not polite to compare me with His Infernal Majesty. Still, we will let that pass. But you—to whom do you compare yourself?"

He laughed at the utter dejection of his victim.

"Never mind, don't take it so seriously, my dear boy. And don't worry, your superiors have not sent me to tempt you. They are not *my* superiors, you know."

Julian rose. The ugly grey robe with the triple cord was too wide for the thin young body. He held himself awkwardly, and yet there was something very dignified about him and Boretius saw it with joy.

"Who are you, Sir?" asked Julian.

There was surprising strength in the youthful voice.

Boretius too stood up, enormous, powerful and fascinating in his strange ugliness.

"I am knowledge," he said slowly. "I am not the tempter. He only pointed to knowledge, he did not give it himself. The devil has nothing to give, he is poor. I—I want to give and my gifts are rich. In thirty years of study I have accumulated all the wisdom that science can provide. I have travelled through more lands than you have heard of, and I have come to find *you*, my friend Julian. Do not ask me how I knew of your existence. I cannot answer that question yet. I shall, in time. It must suffice that I knew about a rare mind, forgotten and neglected in surroundings utterly unsuitable. Have you no longing for knowledge, friend Julian? Is the dreary repetition of the same formulæ of prayer really all your intellect thirsts for? Do the names of Homer, of Plato, of Aristotle mean nothing to you at all? Yours is an intellect of the first order. Only cowards are afraid to think. I cannot believe that you are a coward. I refuse to believe it."

"Homer—Plato—" stammered Julian. "We are not allowed—"

That smile again.

"Give me knowledge," said Julian hoarsely. "Give—give—"

"Take!" said Boretius with sparkling eyes, and from his

huge cloak he produced two rolls of parchment. "And blessed be this hour more solemn than you can yet know. It is at this hour, my Julian, that your life begins."

The thin voice of the bell sounded plaintively from behind the grey walls.

Julian wanted to say something, two, three, a dozen things; different things were clamouring for expression, but none came.

"I understand," said Boretius, now quite calm. "You must go now. We shall meet again this afternoon. Don't worry. Don't worry about anything. Read."

There was a gleam in the lean young face. Then Julian turned and ran across the meadow towards the back gate of the monastery.

Boretius' eyes followed him, until he had slipped through the heavy wooden door.

Clumsy movements. When he smiled he looked like a girl. Blushed like a girl, too. The chief weakness—vanity. That is how they will get at him. But I shall get at him first and that is all that matters.

Has it been too much for the first lesson?

No. Just right. I have no time to nibble like a rat. I must bite like a lion.

What eyes he has got. *Her* eyes. Her unforgettable eyes.

What would she think if she knew?

Why must I think of that? Be still. There is only one thought worth thinking.

And the first seed has been planted. . . .

CHAPTER V

It was just about an hour before daybreak when little Brother Matthew entered the chapel.

A very small chapel it was, built for no more than fifty, and now that they were nearer eighty than seventy, the monks had to huddle close together in order to participate in Holy Mass.

But at present the low chairs were stacked one on top of the other, and the curtain in front of the altar was drawn.

The atmosphere of the room was cold and stuffy.

What little light there was came from the Eternal lamp, whose oil little Brother Matthew had come to renew.

Everybody called him "little" Brother Matthew, except Deacon Perditus and from his height everyone seemed to merit that epithet—all except, of course, Abbot Thomas.

Little Brother Matthew was very ugly. He had a wrinkled face, a snub nose and a large mouth, almost like a frog's, with ears to match. He was no more than thirty or thirty-two years old, one could not say for sure. As a little child he had been found by some villagers on the road to Tarsus, with a sword cut right across his skull. The villagers had brought him to the nearest midwife, who swore by Venus and Cybele that she had never seen an uglier child and could fully understand people trying to get rid of him.

Nevertheless she disapproved of the method of doing so, did what she could with her herbs and plasters and a few mild spells, and within three days the boy was out of danger. Within two weeks he was as normal as could be and that meant he was even more of a nuisance than before.

The villagers steadfastly refused to take him back: they had only found him, he was not the son of anybody they knew, and they had trouble enough with their own kids, as the gods knew, and if Dalla, the midwife, did not know what to do with him, that was her affair.

Now, unlike what some people seem to think, it is quite a business to be a midwife; one has to rush about and deal with a lot of excited people and cannot, indefinitely, cope with a brat of—well, three or maybe five—if he was very small for his age.

So, when the bearded man came in his grey-white coat with the triple cord, one of the lunatics who had settled down near the Arghi Dagh, at Macellum—Christians they called themselves and believed in that fast-growing superstition that had something to do with crosses and fish and other magic emblems—and offered to take care of the boy for *nothing*, as only a lunatic would, the midwife pushed him gently into his arms, and off they went, lunatic and foundling, never to return.

Such was the short history and pedigree of little Brother Matthew. Whether as a consequence of the sword cut, or of Mother Dalla's herbs, not much hair had grown on his skull, and what little there was had grown in all directions and resisted very tenaciously any attempt at symmetry and order. The brain underneath it was a bit queer too—at least so most people thought, not excluding Deacon Perditus. And thus, although he had come to an age when others had made their vows and many even the final and irrevocable one, little Brother Matthew was still a lay brother and only permitted to perform the menial functions of office.

He now started his work, erecting a pyramid of three chairs, one placed on top of the two others, and climbed up to fill the lamp.

From this lofty seat he could look beyond the curtain, separating the altar from the nave of the chapel.

"What! Again?" he said, shaking his head. When he had filled the lamp, he climbed down and began to put the chairs in order for the Hora, the morning prayer at daybreak.

Then—and only then—he drew the curtain aside, and there was Brother Julian, sitting on the thin carpet covering the steps and engrossed in another of those scrolls.

"Already?" asked Julian, rather angrily. "Surely it can't be anywhere near daybreak yet? It's still quite dark, isn't it?"

"You have been up all night, for the third night running, Brother Julian," said little Brother Matthew reproachfully. "You will get as stupid in the head as I am if you go on like that, and just what the Deacon would say, if he knew, I don't like to think. Fancy reading in this light too. It's shocking bad for your eyes."

"I had a bit of candle," admitted Julian. "It lasted quite a long time. Then, of course, it wasn't so good, but what can one do? Oh, Matthew, if you only knew the wonders I've been reading about!"

"You're all flushed, Brother Julian; you have a nasty fever, no doubt of it. And your hands—look how they're trembling. The third night too. You'll ruin yourself. I'm not sure I hadn't better tell the Deacon after all."

"Brother Matthew, you can't!" expostulated Julian. "You've solemnly promised you wouldn't give me away. I hold you to it."

The little monk shook his heavy head.

"It was wrong. I shouldn't have done it. How can you keep your eyes open at Mass, with no sleep at all? It's not human."

Julian jumped to his feet. He pressed the precious rolls to his breast, as though the little man had come to rob him of them.

His eyes gleamed.

"You will not give me away," he whispered angrily. "You won't, d'you hear? Just breathe a word of it, and by Hercules, I'll—"

He did not finish his threat.

So utterly bewildered looked the ugly little man with his bil-can, that his sense of humour got the better of him.

"Come, now, little Brother Matthew," he grinned. "Don't be a fool. I'm sorry I lost my temper. It was very silly of me. Sinful, too—I suppose. I *know* you are not going to give me away, you are much too kind-hearted."

"I thought you were going to hit me with your precious parchments," muttered the little man. "And my skull is very

sensitive. Still, I suppose—" he chuckled—"it would be the only way of getting into it what is written in there. It's not your fault, really, Brother Julian, I know. But it's very wrong of yon feller Boretius to stuff you up with all this. It's him I should tell the Deacon about, not you."

"As if that would help you," jeered Julian. "Deacon Perditus has no jurisdiction over Boretius. And not a word against him, little Brother; you don't know him. He is the most wonderful person I've ever met. I'm so grateful to him, I could go down on my knees. Oh, little Brother, if you could only understand the worlds he let me look into! As high as the sky and as deep as the sea, and full, full of miracles of thought. Man can think, little Brother—that is what I have discovered. Man can think such wonderful things that it's like the flight of birds to the sun."

"I'm not a bird," growled Brother Matthew. "And the sun will be up any minute now. I'll have to ring the bell for the Hora. What's the good of all these beautiful thoughts, if they make you lose all your sleep, night after night?"

"Don't you see that I *must* use the time while Boretius is still here?" argued Julian. "He may have to leave soon. Then—I don't know how I shall stand it, little Brother. His wisdom! His knowledge! He is a fountain, a living miracle of a man. Never have I seen anything like him."

"But what is it all about, this stuff in your parchments? I hope it's not one of those new-fangled heresies, like the Donatists preach, or the Arians!"

"It has nothing to do with it. History, little Brother, the glorious history of Rome. The nature of God and Man explained by the finest brain of all times—Plotinus."

"God is good," said little Brother Matthew contentedly. "That is all I need to know of His nature. And Man is not so good and could be a lot better. That's all I need to know of Man. You and your old parchments."

"You are a fortunate man, little Brother." Julian smiled. "You are content with knowing—what you know. But have patience with me who can't be as you are. I am thirsty, I am parched with thirst, I want to know, little Brother. How has evil come into the world, if God has created everything? The Deacon couldn't answer me that one! And what *is* evil? What is the essence of evil? Has it the same root as good or no? Is not what is evil for me, good for you and what is evil for you, good for me? What is the difference then? These books here will tell me, you see?"

Little Brother Matthew blinked.

"Someone's said that before," he muttered. "Now who was it?"

His eyes widened suddenly.

"Ye shall know good and evil," he said. "I've read that: ye shall know good and evil. But where have I read it? I'm sure—"

"Never mind, never mind," interposed Julian hastily. "I shall go to my cell now. I must not be found here before the time. And, mind, little Brother—not a word."

"All right, all right," grumbled Brother Matthew. "But no fourth night for you, Brother Julian. I hate a bad conscience. It's like a lead ball in my head—like when I'd broken the big silver candlestick, two years ago, and didn't tell the Deacon, lest he punish me. A horrible old lead ball. But when I told him in the end, 'cos it hurt so much—ping!—it was gone and I was as light as a feather. You'd better tell the Deacon yourself. You'll feel much better— There he goes, swift as a cat. My, my, he and his old parchments. And there comes the sun, looking just like a ripe orange. I'd better ring the bell now."

And he entered the tiny room, where the heavy rope hung.

"Come on, bell," he said, chuckling. "I'll ring you nicely. Not that it'll wake *him* up from any sleep, him and his old rolls. Ye shall know good and evil. But I'm *sure* I've read that—or heard it. Ye shall know—"

Suddenly his large mouth opened wide, the small bead eyes goggled in horror.

"It's the serpent!" he cried. "It's the serpent in Paradise who said it."

He grasped the bell rope as though it were the serpent's scaly body. The bell uttered a plaintive sobbing noise.

Little Brother Matthew rung and rung.

"The serpent," he repeated with every new effort.

"The serpent—the serpent—"

CHAPTER VI

Strangely enough, Boretius seemed to agree with Brother Matthew, when he met Julian after breakfast at their favourite place under the pines.

"You've overdoing it, Julian. You are pale and your eyes are rimmed—"

The young monk laughed merrily.

"Let me overdo it, Sir—never before in my life have I been so happy. And I must make up, mustn't I, for so many years of—of not knowing? What a cruel thing that man's nature should demand sleep! Some men sleep six and even seven hours every night. Just fancy: a fourth, maybe almost

a third of one's whole life spent in a state of unconsciousness, thoughtless, useless. Nature has cheated man."

"Perhaps not so much as you think," remarked Boretius. "You may not know, consciously, that you are alive. But you are alive all the same. You may not think with thoughts generated in the vehicle called the brain—but there is another sort of thinking, generated in another vehicle. Don't despise Hypnos, the gentle brother of Death. He is a god of many gifts, of more than most others, and if it were not for him, you would not be able to grasp the wonders of conscious life."

"I don't quite understand." There was a deep furrow between the brows of the young forehead. "You are talking of gods—surely you are a Christian, as I am?"

Boretius did not reply and the furrow deepened.

"I have not seen you at Mass, Boretius—you—you are a Christian, aren't you? Oh, don't smile at me like that. This is—very serious. Because, if you are not—"

"Aren't you just a little too young, Brother Julian, to be my Father Confessor?" interjected Boretius amiably, and Julian hung his head. "I did speak of gods," resumed the eunuch, "and rightly so. Christianity admits the potentiality, at least, that the gods of the so-called pagans exist."

"But only as demons," interposed Julian zealously. "Not as the true source of power. You don't pray to Hypnos to send you sleep, do you?"

This time the furrow appeared between Boretius' brows.

"Never mind what I do, Brother Julian, most pious of Christians. But as it seems so essential to you, I will tell you: *I have been baptised.*"

Julian's thin face lit up. "Oh, I'm so glad. I did so want to be sure. I want to trust you implicitly, quite without reservations."

"And that you could only do if I am baptised, my poor Julian? Was Marcus Aurelius then not to be trusted? The philosopher on the throne, the man of absolute integrity and of the highest flight of the soul? Is all his wisdom nothing in comparison with that of Deacon Perditus, the ex-wrestler. What has come over you, Julian?"

The young man's knuckles gleamed white as he pressed his hands to his burning forehead.

"I don't know, Boretius. This new wisdom of yours overwhelms me, it roars like lions, and trumpets like elephants, and hisses like serpents. I'm torn to pieces. It's too much for me. . . ."

"You are ill, Julian," cried Boretius, jumping to his feet.

"No, no, not ill," gasped the ashen lips. "Only tired, so tired—"

Then gently the meadow came up to meet his body and all was darkness.

When Julian awoke, he was in bed, in his cell.

Boretius' huge face loomed in the background. Now it approached, growing and growing, until it seemed to fill the room. The dark eyes in their deep hollows seemed enormous.

"Better," said a voice from nowhere. "Better. Much better."

The mists cleared away and one could sit up. They cleared still further and there was a hand with a cup, Boretius' hand with a cup and the cup grew upwards to one's lips and a voice said, "Drink this," and one did, and it was fire, cold fire, strongly spiced, and the blood began to pulse and all was well.

"What was it, Boretius? What celestial medicine have you given me?"

The huge face smiled. "The juice of grapes from the hills of Chios, the gift of Bacchus, another of your Christian demons, Brother Julian. My slave always carries a goatskinful with him wherever we travel. No—no more. You have never tasted wine before, have you? I thought so. Too much of it disturbs the clarity of thought, as you will see in others."

Julian nodded.

"I *have* seen it—once," he said. "When Chryso . . . when one of the monks had secretly opened the door of the cellar where they keep the Mass wine before it is consecrated. He went down and drank and drank. They had to carry him up, he couldn't walk alone; he was bawling horrible words and lashing out at the two brothers carrying him; then he was sick—"

A spasm of revulsion went through the thin body.

"Since then I never wanted to taste wine, ever."

"Everything is poisonous, when taken in the wrong quantity, and nothing when taken in the right one," said Boretius calmly. "You will understand that one day—when you are older. Now, no more talking. You must sleep. I have spoken to the Deacon. You are on the sick list, and in my care as your doctor. You have no other duty than to get well, and you will get well. Sleep, Julian—"

Raising his large hand he made a few passes over the boy's eyes and forehead.

Julian's head dropped sideways on the hard pillow stuffed with straw.

Someone was scratching at the door.

"Enter," said Boretius, recognising the peculiar rhythm. And it was Hiempsal, as he had thought, who came in, folding his arms upon his broad chest and bowing deeply.

"What is it? Speak softly."

"No messenger has left the monastery so far to-day."

"Good."

"But one has arrived, just now, and I heard him talking to the big man, the Deacon. There is a rumour that the Emperor has lost a big battle at Sin—Sing—"

"Singara?"

"Yes, Master, that was the word. The army is in full retreat, they say."

"Is this messenger a soldier or a priest?"

"A priest, Master. He is dressed just like the men who live here. They call him Brother Marcus and he comes from another monastery, somewhere near the Persian frontier."

"Good. Where is he now?"

"With the Abbot."

"Alone with him?"

"Yes, Master."

"Idiot! Why didn't you listen at the door?"

"I tried, Master, but their voices are very low and the door is very thick. I could not hear anything."

Boretius pondered for a while. Then he said: "It is well. You may go."

The giant slave withdrew.

It was scarcely of great importance to know what the Abbot and the messenger had discussed. It was logical enough that the old monk wanted to know what was going on in the world—these monks hardly ever left their monastery and visitors were rare. It was unlikely that a priest would bring direct news from the Imperial Court, let alone orders. Very likely Abbot and messenger were talking about some business of their Order. To these people the war was a sideshow, and of far less importance than an evening prayer unsaid.

But the outcome of the battle at Singara could have important consequences. If the rumour was true—as well it might be, with Constantius as Commander-in-Chief of the Roman army—and if the defeat was severe enough; there might be trouble: serious trouble.

A defeated Emperor is always in a precarious position: he has got to keep a sharp lookout, if he does not want to be confronted with opposition at home. If Constantius was defeated decisively, King Sapor of Persia might seize the opportunity and attack the Roman Empire.

He can cross the Euphrates, they've got those keleks, those

rafts of blown-up goatskin; I've seen them dozens of times. Then they can choose whether to attack Egypt—Sapor secretly regards it still as a Persian province lost and to be regained—or Asia Minor.

Egypt is more likely, they are conservative by nature, these Persians. But we can take no chances on Persian conservatism.

If for once they are bold, they might attack due west and that means we might have Parthian cavalry in Antioch within a few weeks.

And from Antioch it is not so very far to Macellum.

That is the situation, if Constantius is decisively defeated.

But if he has merely lost a battle, he will look out for revolts—which might start anywhere. He will study the list of political suspects. He'll go through it with a fine comb.

He may, it is not at all likely, but he *may* think of the boy.

And, when Constantius thinks of someone, it usually means death.

We can take no chances on Constantius' thoughts either.

We must act . . . and soon. As soon as the boy is well enough.

He rose quietly and slid out of the tiny cell. The poet Mucianus, in one of his more malicious epigrams, had called him "the dignified porpoise," and like a porpoise he moved, smoothly, quickly, noiselessly. He seemed to glide rather than walk, and as though at every moment he might change his course and move in an entirely different direction.

Near the door into the courtyard he saw Hiempsal, who seemed to be idling about without any particular purpose.

Passing him, he threw a leather purse at him, which the slave caught deftly.

"Go to town, Hiempsal," whispered Boretius, "and buy a horse. The best you can get. Say one of ours is lame. But leave it with the dealer at present. We may need it in a day or two. Begone."

CHAPTER VII

Abbot Thomas was alone in his study. It was a cloudy afternoon. Occasional shafts of sunlight broke through the high window on to the rolls and parchments on his desk. It was the same desk that he had used when he first became Abbot, and the same chair, though it had been upholstered many times since then.

Only the body in it had changed, had withered away, until now it was only the size of a half-grown boy.

When Boretius was ushered in by the ever-silent Brother Timothy, he thought at first the old man was asleep.

But then he saw his eyes moving under the half-closed lids and at the same time he felt, with that unerring instinct of his, that there was war.

"You sent for me, Most Reverend Father," he said in his suave voice. "Here I am—at your service."

The bony hand pointed to the chair before the desk.

"Be seated, Boretius. Yes, I have sent for you, and whether you are at my service or the Emperor's, or your own, we shall soon see."

Yes, it was war. A good thing that it did not come entirely as a surprise.

"You make me curious, Most Reverend Father."

"Boretius, when you were sitting in this chair for the first time, you asked me in the Emperor's name, and on the strength of his hand-seal, to give you what you called a temporary tutorship over one of the brothers of this monastery—Brother Julian."

"Prince Julian—yes."

"He is Brother Julian to us," said the Abbot calmly. "You said you wished to examine the character of the brother, in order to deliver a report to your Master, the Emperor, who then would decide about his future. It is now a week since you started your—investigation, and I cannot believe that a mind like yours needs more time to reach conclusions. What are your conclusions, Boretius?"

The eunuch withstood the searching eyes with equanimity.

"My conclusions are only for the ear of His Majesty, the Emperor, Most Reverend Father."

The Abbot nodded slightly, as though to indicate that this was exactly the answer he had expected.

"Very well, Boretius. In any case, then, there are conclusions and that is all you wanted. The temporary tutorship has therefore come to an end, and Brother Julian will forthwith resume his spiritual duties in accordance with his position as a brother."

The eunuch smiled coldly.

"I am afraid that is out of the question, Most Reverend Father. In fact, I must suggest to you that Prince Julian leave with me to-morrow for Antioch."

The Abbot's eyes closed for a moment. When he opened them again, they were hard as gimlets.

"The suggestion is refused," he said. "Nay, do not threaten

me again with that hand-seal of yours, Boretius; it will not help you in any way."

"You are resisting the Emperor's authority?" asked the voice, still suave, but with a menacing undertone. "Have you not learnt, old man, and that from your own Master's lips, to render unto Cæsar what is Cæsar's?"

Up shot the Abbot's right arm, with a vehemence startling even to so self-assured a man as Boretius.

"I warn you, Boretius. The words of Our Lord have a way of turning against the man who quotes them in vain or for selfish ends! The quotation goes on: 'and unto God the things that are God's.' That is precisely the reason why I must forbid you to take Brother Julian away with you, or even to speak to him again, be it as much as a single word. For you are out to destroy, Boretius—to destroy his immortal soul, which is God's and not the Emperor's."

The eunuch did not move. Quietly, almost drily he asked: "What do you mean by that, you foolish old man?"

The Abbot's hands opened and closed a number of times and his thin, lipless mouth moved constantly, as if often the way with very old men striving to remember something. At last the words came, slowly at first, like drops of water, then quicker and quicker.

"It would be monstrous to believe for a moment that the mind was unable to perceive ideal truth as it is and that we had not certainty and real knowledge concerning the world of intelligence. It follows therefore, that this region of truth is not to be investigated as a thing external to us, and so only imperfectly known. It is within us. Here the objects we contemplate and that which contemplates are identical—both are thought. The subject cannot surely know an object different from itself. The world of ideas lies within our intelligence. Truth, therefore, is not the agreement of our apprehension of an external object with the object itself. It is the agreement of the mind with itself. Consciousness, therefore, is the sole basis of certainty."

The eunuch could not but admire the old man at this moment, both for being able to quote, from memory, one of the most difficult philosophical deductions of Plotinus, word for word—and for conveying, in doing so, that he knew all about Julian's new studies. He had underrated, hitherto, the old man's mind.

"Did not Plotinus speak the truth about Truth, Most Reverend Father?"

"No, Boretius, for he did not give the *whole* of the truth. 'I am the Truth,' said the Lord. He is the Truth, all of the Truth, and no man can subtract one iota from it. Neither

Plotinus, nor Plato—and not you either, Boretius. What have you done? We are rearing a rare soul, immature as yet, but trying to give it a sound, stable foundation of faith. You have consistently used every day of the past week to undermine this faith, by pouring out, over the bewildered mind, a flood of half-understood philosophy. You have used thoughts as a wanton woman may use her charms—to allure, to bewitch, to cast spells over the soul of a boy given into my care. And on whose instigation have you done it? The Emperor's? Is the Emperor really interested in Brother Julian's definitions, dialectics and analytics? Or has Boretius himself an interest in captivating the boy's mind? Oh, I know how drab, how primitive and simple faith *appears* by the side of that brilliant woman, knowledge. Just as drab as a good housewife next to the shimmering silks and jewels of the dancing girl. But to which of these two would we sooner entrust the soul of a child?"

"The fact that he swallows the water, proves that he is thirsty."

"You have not given him water, but poison, Boretius, and he fell ill under your care. Wisdom is not gained in this way. Without the foundation of faith it is always dangerous and more often than not poisonous. What? If a man is thirsty after a long run in the hot sun, would you give him as much cold water as he wants? And yet—cold water, by itself, is innocent enough and a blessing, yes, even a necessity. But I am weary of fencing with you. You have heard my decision."

And still the eunuch's voice had lost nothing of its habitual suaveness.

"You seriously expect to keep the boy here, against the Emperor's orders?"

"Certainly, I do. And if I were you, I would do nothing rash, Boretius. The position of the Third Chamberlain is not the highest at the Imperial Court. I am a Roman citizen just as much as you are and I shall send *my* report to the Emperor in due course. Also, I would not rely too much on Centurion Lucius Priscus and his soldiers in Macellum. He is a good Christian."

The eunuch shook his head and smiled beatifically.

"Excellent, Most Reverend Father. So, when you resist an Imperial order, the worthy Priscus won't try to take your old rubble-heap by assault, will he? And your estimable and gallant Deacon Perditus will have no opportunity of renewing the fame he once won in the arena: too bad. You seem to have worked it all out beautifully. No *x* in your equation, no unknown quantity. You've got it all fixed. By Hecate, I ad-

mire you, Most Reverend Father. I underrated you at the beginning of our acquaintance, but I assure you I do not underrate you any more."

He rose heavily and took a step towards the Abbot's desk; he sat down on the desk, a huge mass of human flesh, covered entirely by the wide honey-coloured cloak, which he seemed never to discard.

"You know, Most Reverend Father, I suspect something. I suspect that you suspect me. Am I right?"

The old man saw the big sallow face with its smooth smile, not man's and not woman's, towering over his own, and instinctively he leaned back as though to avoid the breath of something poisonous and foul.

He nodded.

"May God forgive me if I do you wrong, Boretius, but I believe that you are evil and that you work for your own ends and not for those of your Master. Go now—go in peace."

The smile, suave, smooth, benign, beatific . . .

"Go? And in peace? Very well, Most Reverend Father. I will. I will—in due course. But let me pay you my respects first—my respects for the intellect you still feed under that bony old skull of yours. You are right and wrong, Most Reverend Father. Wrong, for I *am* working for my Master—or should I say my Mistress? Right, for in doing so, I further my own ends. I have taken possession of the boy hitherto in your charge, the young eagle whom you were trying to rear as a dove. He is much too good to rot on your rubble-heap. Constantius has been beaten by the Persians. He is a weakling, and what little strength he has he spends on crime—crime necessary to keep himself in the saddle."

The Abbot found himself staring into the face of a fiend, revolting in its ugly nakedness. The broad nostrils were moist like those of an animal; the mouth, embedded in hairless hills and valleys of oily skin, squirted words in jerky eruptions.

"So far, the Emperor has succeeded, but only against men who never had a chance to stand up against him. Maybe it will not always be so. Maybe one day he will meet a real antagonist, a *born* Emperor; and who might he be? Surely he must be of Imperial blood. Only Imperial blood can fill the throne of the Empire. But every Emperor is condemned to failure, as long as he embraces the faith that makes meekness an ideal, and strength a pagan vice—"

" 'Get thee behind me—' " murmured the withered lips.

The eunuch laughed aloud.

"I am not Satan, you fool—although I can think of a worse fate than that of the Master of the Night. But again you were right as well as wrong: I am also not Boretius, Third Chamberlain of His Bloody Majesty Constantius, who may be damned to the deepest gaol of Tartarus. Never mind how I got hold of this hand-seal! My name is Mardonius, and I am a priest of gods, of which the least is dwelling world-high over your wretched Galilean— Oh, no, you don't!"

And he pinned the Abbot's hand down to the desk, before it could reach the bell.

"No good calling out either, you fool—my servant has seen to it that no one is near enough to hear your croaking old voice. Oh, it does me good to say it, to speak out what I have had to keep in my breast for so many years—more than twenty. My quest is at an end: I have found the eagle who will put the foul breed desecrating this proud Empire where it belongs. It is a huge task; well do I know it. But it has fallen on the right shoulders. Alone I could do nothing. With this little Prince of the blood as my figurehead I have got the point outside the world, of which Archimedes spoke: the point necessary to unhinge the world. Quiet, old man. You guessed right. I would not tell you my innermost secret if I did not know the exact span of your life. See, you will die painlessly. I have no grudge against you—die in peace—"

And suddenly the eunuch's left arm shot out of the folds of his cloak. So lightning-swift was the movement of his hand that it seemed as though he just touched the Abbot's mouth.

But when he withdrew his hand, a tiny copper hood became visible on his forefinger, ending in a needle-sharp point. There was a drop of blood on it.

"The tiniest wound in your mouth, old man—it will never be seen by anybody. And already you are almost paralysed. Three more breaths—perhaps four—then—"

The Abbot's face was drained of blood. A blueish tinge began to show round his nostrils, his eyes and his mouth. He sat immobile. His breath rattled.

Mardonius regarded him with a scientific interest.

"One—you are doing nicely— There goes another. What! No third? No third? Well, he was very old."

The eunuch slid down from the desk, only now releasing his grip on the Abbot's right hand.

The old man had slumped in his chair. The filmy eyes were staring into the void.

Calmly Mardonius left the room. In the corridor he met Hiempsal.

"Go and get the third horse. We shall need it immediately." The giant slave vanished.

Like a shadow, from the end of the corridor, a worried face appeared—Brother Timothy.

Mardonius walked straight up to him.

"What is the sign for all monks to assemble, Brother Timothy?"

"The gong, in the entrance to the refectory," stammered the lay brother. "But only the Most Reverend Father can—"

"The Most Reverend Father died a few minutes ago from a sudden stroke. No, stay—lead me to that gong of yours. No use running—you can never catch up with death. Ah, here it is, give me that stick."

And Mardonius began to beat the huge gong with heavy strokes.

They appeared from all sides, young and old, in their grey-white garb with the triple cord.

Ants, thought Mardonius contemptuously. Grey ants. Come on, gather, vermin. How many are there? Seventy something, if I remember rightly. Well, that means we are almost complete. Ah, here is the man I want.

"Come to my side, Deacon Perditus; yes, it is I who have called you. I have grave news for you, worthy Fathers."

They stared at him in blank surprise. Many of them had never seen him before, and those who had, knew him only as a modest, always smiling guest of the Abbot; there had been a rumour that he was here on some business or other, that he was a merchant from Tarsus, from Antioch, from Ephesus; some, who had seen him walking side by side with Brother Julian, thought he might be a relation of his. But now, in front of them, stood a man who did not smile: a man with an imperious air and an iron will.

Who was he?

"The time has come for me to tell you what, so far, I had only told the Most Reverend Father, the Abbot. I am Boretius, Third Chamberlain of his Imperial Majesty, Emperor Constantius to whom may God grant victory and a long life."

"Amen," came the answer from many lips. But the majority were still far too astonished to show any reaction, other than bewilderment.

"Here is the Emperor's own hand-seal," Mardonius went on—"as the outward sign of my authority as his special emissary. My mission is of a nature which I could only disclose to the Most Reverend Father Abbot. I found him to be the most worthy, obedient and zealous servant of my Imperial Master, and our negotiations had progressed in the most satisfactory way and had, in fact, been concluded. Alas! Just when I was going to take my leave, the venerable old man

fainted and, half a minute later, died in my arms from a stroke. I am mourning with you, my beloved Fathers, for in the few days of my sojourn here, I had come to love as well as to respect this wonderful old man. With his last breath he named Deacon Perditus as his successor, and I, in my authority as Special Emissary of His Majesty the Emperor, am glad to confirm and acknowledge the wisdom of his choice. Behold, then worthy Fathers, your new Abbot."

Dumbfounded, utterly bewildered, stood the ex-wrestler in the turmoil of lamenting, weeping, praying monks.

The soft, flabby hand of the eunuch grasped his ham-like fist with a surprising strength.

"Awake, Most Reverend Father, there is much to be done. No, let them flock to see the poor remains of your saintly predecessor. Later, you will direct the ceremonies due to this occasion. But at present I must have your ear, only for a few moments, on urgent business of the State. In the name of the Emperor!"

CHAPTER VIII

Everything was new on this journey; new in a strange, unreal way. The first new thing was the litter which Hiempsal had searched for and discovered while they were still at Macellum. Boretius had insisted that Julian should travel in it.

"You are not strong enough yet for a long day in the saddle, my son."

There were six sturdy slaves to carry it, from the hiring establishment of a Jewish merchant. The province of Cappadocia exported a large number of its sons for such purposes, and the Emperor himself had several teams of Cappadocians for the Court litters. They were cheerful and seemingly inexhaustible men, keeping pace with the horses without apparent effort. At first it was a queer experience being carried by men, to see their naked, muscular backs, burnt deep brown by the relentless sun, moving around one in a strange rhythm. Every hour they changed places with each other and they had acquired an unerring sense of time. The litter was filled with cushions and rugs, almost too soft to be comfortable.

From time to time Boretius would ride up to the litter and exchange a few words with him, but not often.

"Rest is what you need, Julian. There is a whole life ahead of you."

"Shall I be allowed to study then?"

"All the knowledge I can give you, all the wisdom of the wisest will be at your disposal. Rest now."

And later, "Tell me, Boretius, how did you do it? By what strange power did you change me from a monk into a traveller? Why, my very dress has changed! How did you persuade the Deacon to let me go?"

"Peace, child. My slave got your travelling clothes from a shop: I apologise for them: they are not worthy of you; but they are inconspicuous, which is all that is needed at present. And the worthy Deacon had to let you go; it was the wish of the late Bishop Eusebius that you should *choose* your career when the time came. Under no circumstances should you be *forced* to become a monk. But there could be no true choice without knowledge. First you must know—then choose."

"You must have great powers, Boretius."

"Rest now. . . ."

Then sleep came again.

Meals were taken by the wayside, although they did pass several inns. Julian wondered a little, but did not dare to ask why.

Towards evening they passed a dozen peasant women coming home from the fields, chattering, laughing and singing.

Julian lowered his eyes until they had been overtaken.

When he looked up again, he found Boretius at his side, the flicker of a smile fading quickly from his lips.

He blushed. But, contrary to his expectation, Boretius said nothing. Julian took his courage in both hands.

"They have voices like cackling hens," he said with an air of nonchalance. The eunuch laughed and rode on.

Women, thought Julian. He had just a glimpse of short-legged plump figures, in drab dresses, before he realised that they were women, the first women he had seen for ten years.

Perhaps they would look alluring and tempting when one saw them at close quarters, but it did not seem very likely. Their shrill high voices still rang in his ears a long time afterwards.

They spent the night at an inn after all. He and Boretius had a *hot meal*: *pulsum*—a porridge with lemon juice and various spices—freshly cooked vegetables, bread and honey, and a flagon of red wine, a simple enough meal, but luxurious compared with the food at the monastery: there, only on Sundays and holidays, was more than one dish served, and

the Fathers alone were privileged to drink wine from a big goblet that went from mouth to mouth. The bed was uncommonly soft too, and it was not easy to maintain the necessary concentration for the evening prayer.

Was it the unaccustomed surroundings? Or was it the feeling, surely quite without justification, that he was being watched?

In the morning, after a breakfast very like the supper of the night before, the journey was resumed.

A young person was standing near the door, dressed in a blue gown which left the arms free. A sunburnt face with very red lips and a mane of very black hair. Dark eyes looked at him with taxing, questioning curiosity. Another woman; evidently the world was full of them. He had a fleeting impression of soft breasts trying to burst out of the narrow gown and of a hidden smile, before he hastily boarded the litter.

The sturdy Cappadocians lifted it immediately, then inn and woman disappeared for ever.

There had been something contemptuous in the young person's smile, he thought. Why? He had hardly looked at her, surely she could not have been offended?

Boretius seemed to be in a hurry, he spurred the Cappadocians to a trot and appeared on his nervous horse now right, now left, now in front of the little procession. The black slave was always in the vanguard.

They passed a good deal of traffic in the early hours—two- and four-wheeled carts, drawn by horses, by oxen, by mules, donkeys or slaves, with fruit and vegetables for the markets of the next villages.

A caravan of camels, on their way to Sinope, with a load of Persian carpets for the summer villa of the Procurator of Pontus. They had a dozen armed slaves with a regular officer as escort.

The wild peaks of Arghi Dagh had disappeared, but the country was still hilly, though full of plantations; olive groves and vines between mulberries and glowing poppy fields.

And all this was cut, as if with a sword, by the long grey road, the Roman road, built by Roman hands for all eternity.

"Have a good look, Julian," said Boretius. "They're everywhere, these grey roads. How many have I seen and in how many different parts of the world! Hundreds and hundreds of them—built by the greatest conquerors of all time—the arteries of the Empire. And see!—here is some of her life blood too, I believe."

A long grey snake was visible, still very far off, slowly winding its way along the road. There was some sort of haze, a misty cloud, all around the snake—its shadow or its aura. It

seemed as though this snake were carrying with it even its own air.

From time to time golden lights flashed up and down the snake's body.

"Soldiers?" asked Julian, curiously moved.

"Yes, Julian, soldiers. Changing the garrison of Macellum, perhaps, or reinforcements for the Emperor's campaign in Persia."

"How many are there?"

"Scarcely more than a few cohorts—a thousand men, if that."

"All they that take the sword, shall perish with the sword," quoted the young monk. "It must be a strange feeling to be a licensed murderer by profession."

"You needn't worry unduly, my witty Christian friend," smiled Boretius. "Rome's wars are purely defensive nowadays. The She-wolf's aggressiveness was spent a long time ago. Now she is simply trying to hold her own, and even so she has not always been successful, lately. The spirit of greatness has gone out of her, or else she would never have accepted the religion of meekness."

"But surely this means progress, not only from the spiritual point of view, but altogether? Surely peace is better than war?"

"Oh yes, on two conditions: that you have got all you want and that no one is in a position to take it away from you. To anyone who knows anything about man, individually or collectively, neither of these conditions seem attainable—ever."

"That is the justification of brute force, Boretius."

"My Julian, forgive me, but you are talking like a blind man might talk about colour: without knowing the facts, the very facts that matter. They didn't teach you much history back there in Macellum, did they? And what little you have read in Livy and Sallust—"

"Thanks to you!"

—"is hardly sufficient to give you a sound foundation. There have been many Empires on earth, my Julian; the Babylonia, Assyrian, Sumerian, the Egyptian, Phœnician, Carthaginian, the Greek, the Macedonian and now the Roman; all these Empires were built by what you call 'brute force.' All of them reached a point when their wills weakened, when they softened, melted. And, every time that happened, a younger, stronger people seized the opportunity and took the reins out of their hands; it's a natural process, Julian. Peoples and nations are like individuals, they make room for the younger generation. This Roman Empire is still fairly young in years, but its ageing process has been

unnaturally hastened, ever since it adopted the creed that true life starts after death: a fatal doctrine, for it makes you concentrate on that afterlife and forget the present, forget life itself. And in the meantime the young nations jump over your fences, into your gardens and fields, and take away what your ancestors won in a thousand hard-fought battles."

"You talk as if the Empire were dying—"

"And so it is, Julian, so it is. Oh, I am not one of those ex-legates or retired captains, who are always telling everybody that the Empire is going to the dogs because this or that rule has been changed, because this or that drill has been abolished; that type has always existed, and always will exist. In another two thousand years retired army men will talk like that; they are always inclined to think that an Empire which can do without *their* services, must go down, for that very reason. I have never been a soldier myself, but I do know a thing or two about history, and I tell you, Rome is going down."

Julian sat up in his litter: "But who will be her successor?" he asked eagerly. "Where is this young nation that can take away our heritage? The Persians? They are older even than we are. The barbarians in the North? Half-naked tribes without leaders?"

"You have read your Livy all right—" the eunuch laughed—"but don't forget, the curve of history shows *first* the weakening of the strong, and then the strengthening of the weak. Sooner or later our weakness will be known and then, and then only, the second phase will start. Livy is past history—wish that we had men like those about whom he wrote, but we have only— Ah! here they are. . . ."

They were marching with full pack, four abreast, in a billowing cloud of dust. Every man was carrying the pilum, the spear and the quadrangular shield. The short broadsword was dangling in its leather sheath. Their helmets were round iron caps with broad cheek-protectors of metal, fastened under the chin with a leather thong. They were grimy with dust and sweat. A save of hot, sweaty masculinity, like the breath of a many-headed monster, emanated from the clanking, tramping mass of men.

Three officers on horseback formed the vanguard. One of them had two silver discs fastened on his armoured breast, decorations which could only be won on active service. He was a short, thick-set man with a surly face. At the sight of the little caravan he turned sharply and immediately the other two turned with him.

A clipped command was answered by a quick precise

sword movement from the Centurion heading the first detachment. The sword pointed upwards and forward: the sign for the column to march on as before, without taking any notice of the three officers, who slowly rode up towards Boretius.

"Stop," said the eunuch to the litter bearers. And, hastily, he added to Julian, "Leave all the talking to me."

Now the officer had reached him, and gave him a searching look. Their horses stood nose to nose.

"Who are you?" drawled the officer. "And where are you going?"

"I am a servant of the Emperor, Tribune, may God grant him victory and a long life—and my name is Boretius. We are going to Trapezus. And where are you going?"

The officer's brows puckered. "That's hardly your affair, my man. The Emperor has many servants. What sort of a servant are you? No, you needn't tell me. I can guess. One of the Court eunuchs with a litter." His surly face broke into a grin. "You're got a girl in there, for the Imperial household. Is she pretty? Let me see her." He peered into the litter.

"A boy," he exclaimed in disgust. "Well, that's a new one on me. Didn't think there was much interest in that sort of thing at Court."

"That, Tribune, is hardly *your* affair," was the cold answer. "You will do well to be polite. I carry the Emperor's hand-seal."

The officer seemed embarrassed.

"I had no intention—I hope you will not—"

"I'm not asking you for your name," said the eunuch. "It is better for you that way. Good luck to you, Tribune. Up, bearers." He rode on without looking back.

The officer shrugged his shoulders and grinned.

"Eunuchs," he muttered. "A plague on them. What they lack they make up for in arrogance. A boy—"

"And not even a handsome one," said one of his centurions with a grin. "Thin and scraggy he looked."

"Maybe it's a political prisoner," ventured the other officer.

"No, he can't be. No guards."

The Tribune pulled his horse about. He had an uncomfortable feeling that the little incident had not exactly increased his authority.

"Bring up that last maniple, Marcellinus," he rasped. "They're dragging their bones like blasted donkeys. What is this—a cohort of the Fifteenth legion or a bunch of Gaditan dancing girls? Make 'em move, or by Styx, I'll let them do parade drill instead of resting to-night."

He dug in his spurs savagely and made off to the vanguard, pursued by the second Centurion who grinned with oafish delight.

Julian had not uttered a word. When the Tribune's face had leered into the litter he had blushed with shame and indignation; he did not quite know why. He felt a wave of satisfaction when he heard Boretius answering back and taking command of the situation. The long dusty column of iron-clad soldiers was still clanking by and more than once he saw one man nudge another, grinning at the sight of the litter.

When the last section of the last maniple had passed, leaving nothing but a thick cloud of dust, he called out.

"Boretius!"

"Yes, Julian, what is it?"

"I'd like to ride, as you do."

The eunuch darted a swift look at him. This was a new tone, metallic, sharp. And the boyish lips were tightly pressed together. There was an indefinable expression on the eunuch's face, as he said: "Very well, Julian. I am glad that you feel stronger. Stop, bearers. Hiempsal, the spare horse. Help him, you—put your foot into his hands, Julian! That's the way—no, take the reins this way— You all right?—good. Up, bearers. Steady."

He had never been on horseback before—it was a queer sensation, the broad animal body between his legs, and an animal will waiting to be subjected to his own.

"Don't hold the reins so tight, Julian."

Boretius kept at his side.

"Well—this is your first encounter with the armed might of Rome. How did you like it?"

"I don't like braggarts, Boretius. When you told him about the Emperor's seal, he went pale and looked afraid."

"Yes, he did not even ask me to show it to him—not so tight on the reins, Julian."

"*Could* you have shown it to him?" asked the young man with some hesitation.

Boretius laughed. "Most of the sparring between men is bluff, Julian. But when you are pinned down you must be able to show something. Even the Tribune believed me—why don't you?"

"But you never told me—"

"There are many things I have never told you, Julian. You shall hear them all in time. Not tired?"

"Oh no—tell me, have you ever seen the Emperor?"

"Often enough. You will too, one day."

"I can't imagine it. What is he like?"

"Constantius? A slight man, with a worried face. Nothing Caesarian about him."

Julian's eyes widened.

"But surely, the Master of the Empire must—?"

"—look like the Master of the Empire? He doesn't. He looks rather as if he's trying to find out where the bad smell's coming from."

"But the very mentioning of his name made the Tribune look green."

"The power of the Emperor is one thing—his personality is another. Also, the less of an emperor he is, the more he must try to exercise his power. You will know more about Constantius in a few days, Julian—enough to form your own opinion anyway; and as I said, you will meet him in the flesh one day; at least I think it's very likely, if he lives long enough. He is certainly trying to ensure it at the expense of other people."

"The way you talk, Boretius, one would think you were not a loyal subject of—"

"—the Emperor to whom may God grant victory and a long life," said Boretius suddenly aloud.

Julian could at first see no reason at all, for such sudden fervour, but looking about, saw two men on horseback coming up, riding in the same direction as they themselves. They were simply dressed and there was nothing in any way conspicuous about them.

One gave them a quick sharp glance, as they rode quickly by. A few minutes later they were already out of sight.

"I forgot one thing in my description of the Emperor," said Boretius calmly. "He's got very long ears. They reach from Byzantium to Britain and Persia. One's got to be careful."

"These men—?"

"May be innocent travellers as we are. But they may just as well be spies. There are Imperial agents everywhere and the nearer the capital the more there are. The thing to be is—uninteresting. It does not pay in this Empire to be an interesting person."

Julian shook his head. "It seems as if the safest place is the cell of a monastery," he said.

The eunuch shrugged his shoulders.

"Safe—perhaps. Except that one is bound to be caught there, if one is interesting after all. On the whole it's safe all right. It's still safer not to be born at all; life is a deadly experiment, my friend."

"I wish I had said that." Julian laughed and, dropping the reins, clapped his hands together. "An experiment that must lead to death. Hey! Stop!"

His horse, tired of walking, had plunged forward, and Julian fell across its neck.

Boretius was there in a flash, seized the animal's reins, brought it to a standstill and helped the young rider to regain his saddle.

"Riding is an art, my friend. You needn't be ashamed of not mastering it in an hour. But the lesson is this: never relinquish the reins when dealing with inferiors. . . ."

They reached the outskirts of Nicomedia.

Boretius halted there and called for a rest. He did not want to enter the town before dark. He knew too many people there and was known by many more.

He did not wish to be asked unnecessary questions regarding the boy. True, he could not hope to conceal his presence for very long, but the longer the better.

Julian, who had steadfastly refused to be carried in his litter, was quite stiff after a whole day's riding. At the resting place he fell asleep almost immediately and did not wake up even for supper.

When night had fallen, Boretius promised the Capadocians a denarius each if they succeeded in lifting him into the litter without waking him up.

The six men set to work, as though dealing with something very precious, and succeeded.

Silently they made their way into the suburbs, past the Via Constantina, circled round the small amphitheatre and entered the fashionable part of the town.

Boretius had pulled one corner of his wide cloak over his head. When they reached the wide bronze door which he knew so well, they halted and Boretius knocked seven times, in a special rhythm.

The door opened inwards and the little caravan entered.

CHAPTER IX

The Julian who found himself sitting on a comfortable chair made of rare wood, on the terrace overlooking the sea, a delicately carved table in front of him, and an awning over his head, seemed a very different person, and small wonder.

Everything that had happened since the first quite incredible moment of awakening was exactly like the

sequence of a strange and bizarre dream; and yet, the strangest thing of all had been that first moment, when he found himself in a rustling silk robe on a settee full of rustling silk cushions, in a room filled with vases of wondrous shapes and so full of flowers as almost to hide the furniture; with inch-deep carpets and a silver lamp shaped like a ship hanging from the amber-coloured ceiling and exhaling the scent of rose-oil.

Memory came back, soft-footed and stealthy: Boretius—the journey—the litter—the horse—an instant of consciousness, dimly recorded, when they had lifted him bodily out of the litter and carried him into the house—or had he dreamt that too?

Anyway, this must be Boretius' house, unless it was the Imperial Palace. Certainly there could be no greater luxury in the Palace.

On a table of citrus wood—rarest of all woods, incredible sums were paid for an unusual grain—he found a silver bowl, with a massive silver ball in it.

As he seized it, still only half-awake, it slipped through his fingers and fell back into the bowl with a lovely "cling." Immediately a slave came in, carrying a tray with an amphora of wine, a small vessel filled with Hymettian honey and a silver goblet. Kneeling in front of the settee, he put the tray on the citrus-wood table, filled the goblet with warm wine from the amphora, added two spoonfuls of honey and stirred it.

He was a young man, not much older than Julian himself, pleasant-featured, a questioning expression in his soft brown eyes.

Julian took the goblet and drank. It was Chios wine sweetened and slightly spiced, the "morning wine" of the upper classes; sufficiently strengthening to make the walk to the bathroom possible for the tired master or mistress.

When Julian had emptied the goblet, the slave got up and led him to the tepidarium; two more slaves were waiting here, with towels and scented Persian soap balls.

After a warm bath in the tiled pool, inlaid with mosaics, came the cold one in a second room, to be followed by a thorough massage—a completely new experience, not altogether pleasant at first, but very much so in the end. It was given by the clever, dry fingers of a sturdy Thracian athlete, whose broken nose suggested that, like Deacon Perditus, he could look back on a career in the arena.

Came the next room, the vestiarius, with two slender, quick-eyed Island Greeks to dress him in a tunic of fine white wool, sandals of soft gilded leather inset with semi-precious

stones, and a short blue cloak, held together by a fibula set with a large turquoise.

A hairdresser was there too, and took the best part of half an hour to set his hair and readjust the shape of his eyebrows. Two or three times the hairdresser threw a doubtful glance at his cheeks and chin, but when he made a rather half-hearted attempt to shave him, Julian protested. It was enough, more than enough. He longed for a breath of fresh air.

The breath of fresh air became a walk, lasting over an hour, through the most beautiful garden he had ever seen.

Bithynian gardeners had learnt from those past masters of gardening, the Persians, how to arrange "paradises": a hundred-coloured flowerbeds, so artfully arranged that they looked, at a very short distance, like priceless carpets. Cages with rare birds were hanging from trees, garlanded with the red, blue and white of the long-flowering convolvulus. Fountains spouted water into beautifully carved basins of bronze and brown marble.

Soon the house itself, with its slim Ionic columns, became a white speck between the trunks of cypress trees, and then the sight, the glorious sight he had not seen since his childhood—the sea.

Clear blue, clearer even than the cloudless sky were the waters of the Propontis, and tiny islands and tinier ships, increased rather than diminished the impression of never-ending space, of infinity.

Here Julian found the terrace; he sat down under the awning; for a long while even his thoughts were drowned in the flood of beauty surrounding him. When, finally, he was able to think, the light step of a young slave interrupted him and a melodious voice asked whether the master wished to breakfast here on the terrace or in the breakfast room.

His first idea was just to send him away, but then he realised that he was hungry, ravenous; yet to eat here, in sight of Paradise itself, would be sacrilege.

He rose and followed the slave back to the house.

Breakfast was served in a sunny room with bright curtains; the floor was covered with thin carpets of Chinese silk; there was white bread, Hymettian honey, the tender fillets of a sweet water fish he had never tasted before—olives, black and green, dates, figs and the golden apples for which Hercules had travelled from Greece to the Hesperides—oranges. Light wines from Naxos and Samothrace, of a glistening reddish brown like cornelian.

After each course a bowl of scented water was brought and a slave dried his fingers with a tiny towel of purple linen.

It was only after he had finished breakfast that Julian asked: "Where is Boretius?"

The Majordomo, corpulent and dignified, looked up in blank surprise.

"To whom does the Master refer?"

"Boretius," repeated Julian. "The Master of this house." The brows of the slave went up, but he answered immediately, "The Master will not return until the afternoon, he has gone to meet a friend in the town."

Julian nodded. He sensed something of an air of mystery, but he did not wish to ask more questions—truly this house was like that of the nymph Calypso, the enchantress who had kept Odysseus with her for so long—full of charms and witcheries the like only dreams could conjure up. One might wake up at any minute.

It was in his favourite place on the terrace that the man he knew as Boretius found him.

Rising, Julian saw that his friend too had undergone a metamorphosis: he was dressed in a tunic and cloak of ivory-coloured silk, richly embroidered, and several rings sparkled on his fingers. But the expression on his huge sallow face was the same: benevolent, intelligent, kind.

"Welcome to freedom, my Julian," said the suave voice. "I trust you feel refreshed after your long sleep."

"I have never felt so well in my life—and that isn't really surprising."

Boretius laughed. "You are discovering some of the things that make life worth living, aren't you?"

"I have discovered the earth, Boretius—by discovering the sea."

"Well said, my poet." (He still blushes when you praise him.) "Yes, the sea, the blue soul of the Empire. It is Roman, Julian, ploughed by our ships from Propontis here to the far-off Pillars of Hercules. Oh, you've been reading, Homer again? I understand. No one has found the melody and rhythm of the sea as he has. Wait until the sun god drives his horses down to the horizon and you will realise why the poet sings of the purple sea."

"It is so beautiful—one can hardly believe that one is still on earth."

"On the contrary, it is your first meeting with the earth. What did you know of your own planet? Four walls. You have been a prisoner."

"In a way, you are right."

"Only in a way? Do you miss your prison?"

So vehemently was this said that Julian looked at the benign face in surprise.

"You hate monasteries, don't you, Boretius? Abbot Thomas, God bless his memory and soul, was very good to me, always. I wish I had been able to thank him for all he did for me before he died. But his death came so quickly—they told me you were with him when it happened. Were you?"

"I was. He did not suffer at all. It was all over before one could count three. A beautiful death. And he was very old. As for his kindness to you, Julian . . ."

The young man was startled.

"Surely, Boretius, even you could not say anything against that saintly old man."

"That saintly old man was a very shrewd old rogue, who knew how important it is to please the mighty. He could lie and twist and play act with the best of us."

"Boretius! You don't mean that!"

"That saintly old man saw to it that you grew up in such a way that you could never become dangerous."

"Dangerous? I? How could I possibly become dangerous to anybody? A poor monk, an orphan, without a soul in the world, without possessions."

"Yes, that is what they taught you to think about yourself, isn't it? Tell me, Julian, what do you know about yourself?"

"Nothing, really."

"No, don't answer me that." The eunuch leaned forward, his hypnotic eyes gleaming. "Delve back into the deepest folds of your memory, Julian," he said in a low incisive voice. "Dive into the past, the earliest time that you can recall—go backwards—they brought you to the monastery when you were seven, six or seven; well, you are six now! Where did you live before? Go backwards, Julian."

"I was with the Most Reverend Bishop Eusebius. I remember his face well, a beautiful old face, a venerable white beard. I used to think he looked exactly as I imagined that God looked. I hope it wasn't a sinful thought."

"Never mind that. Where were you?"

"In a great house in some town. I was not allowed to go out and play, because . . . I don't know, why."

"Of course you don't. But go back, still further. Who brought you to Bishop Eusebius?"

"I—I don't know, I think he did, the Bishop himself."

"Very likely. Still further back now—don't you remember another house?"

"Yes, I do, dimly. It was a big place too, and very noisy. And someone was ill, and I had to walk on tiptoe and the

house smelt ill; ever since I have disliked the smell of vinegar."

"Vinegar, I see. There must have been an infectious disease in the house. Who was ill?"

"My—my brother was ill. He died afterwards."

Boretius nodded. "Quite right. So he did. But not from the illness, although many have died from it. What about your father, your mother?"

"I—don't remember their faces at all. You see—" He stopped rather abruptly, blushing again. The young man's eyes were lowered. "It is foolish, perhaps," he muttered. "But when I prayed—we had a little statue of the Mother of God in the chapel, it was not the work of a very good artist, Abbot Thomas used to say when it was mentioned, but it seemed very beautiful to me, and somehow, the memory of my mother—"

"—became one†with the face, the expression, the gesture of the statue, is that right?"

"Yes, yes, I know I shouldn't, it's very likely . . ."

But he could not use the word "sinful" again.

"I took it as a symbol," he went on. "The Mother of God was the only mother I had. I wish you wouldn't smile, Boretius!"

"I'm not smiling at you, my son. So no one would tell you about your mother or father? And you do not even know their names?"

"No, I don't. I know nothing about them at all—except that they are dead."

Very slowly, grimly, came the next question: "And how do you know *that*?"

Julian stared in blank amazement. "But—I *am* an orphan—I was told so many a time—by the Most Reverend Abbot—by Deacon Perditus—"

"And you were satisfied with the story of having been picked up in a big house by Bishop Eusebius of Nicomedia—"

"Whom may—" But Julian did not finish the pious formula.

"The good Bishop didn't even know to whom the house belonged," went on the eunuch. "He just entered a big house and snatched a little child? Or did someone give it to him? How is it that you are called Julian? Did the Bishop christen you? Oh no, he didn't; and why not? Surely, if he knew nothing at all about you, it was his first duty to baptise you, to make sure that you belonged to the flock of those which may, one fine day, enter heaven, because water has been dribbled on their heads and a certain formula spoken over them. But

he didn't baptise you. He knew that you had been baptised before, and that you had been given the name of Julian. He knew that because he knew your parents very well—he kept that knowledge from you, just as your saintly Abbot Thomas did. All they told you was that you were an orphan and that the worthy Bishop was your guardian and wanted you to become a monk, a priest, in other words, a prisoner in a monastery—and you weren't even given the chance of planning your own life."

"But surely—" interposed Julian. "You yourself told me that Bishop Eusebius was giving me the choice and that you were bringing me here for that reason—"

"I said that to a boy who was so ill that he had to be carried in a litter, not to a young man who wanted to ride a horse—and rode it."

The young man was very pale now and beads of perspiration were gathering on his forehead.

"Boretius—then—you didn't tell me the truth—"

"My poor Julian, I found you weakly wriggling in a net of lies, big and small, white, grey and black. You had heard nothing but lies for years. How could you have borne the entire truth, all at once? It would have killed you. I'm not sure whether you are fit enough to hear it even now—"

Julian jumped to his feet. "I am, Boretius. I am. Oh, what are you going to tell me? I—I don't understand you at all, you say Bishop Eusebius—"

"The Bishop was only a wretched agent in this game, Julian, a nonentity, a man acting under orders—"

"Whose orders? God's, you mean?"

"Certainly not. The Emperor's."

"Then it was on the Emperor's orders that you brought me here?"

"No, though that story was good enough for Deacon Perditus."

Julian passed a tired hand over his forehead. "I simply don't understand, Boretius," he murmured.

"Of course not. But you will. You may think your lucky stars—and lucky indeed they are—that I haven't brought you here on the Emperor's orders, although your former superior in Macellum still believes that I was an Imperial emissary. Did it not strike you as strange when I told that uncouth Tribune we met on our journey that we were travelling to Trapezus? You knew we were going to Nicomedia; I had told you. But I had to mislead him, to cover up our trail. To Perditus also I said I was taking you to Trapezus. As things are now, if I really were an Imperial official, you would probably be dead within a day."

"But why—why—"

"I do carry the Emperor's hand-seal, that is quite true. But the seal is faked, cleverly enough. I daresay. One of my slaves is a past master at that-sort of thing. And my name is not Boretius, Julian—it's Mardonius."

The young man held his head between both hands. "I am going mad," he ejaculated. "Holy Father in heaven, have pity on me—I am going mad."

"Oh no, Julian, you're not. I am sorry—desperately sorry that I have had to tell you lies—you of all people, whose life is more sacred to me than anything I possess—more sacred than my own life—you, the son of the only human being I ever loved—your mother!"

For a moment Julian stood transfixed, his hands still raised to his head. Then he sat down, still uncomprehending, his thin arms falling to his sides lifelessly.

"My mother," he whispered. "You knew my mother—"

Mardonius sat down beside him. "I knew her—when I was a man," he said tonelessly. Never throughout his life would Julian realise what it cost this strange man to utter those words, the admission of his burning shame. Now that he had spoken them, the rest of his story came out in breathless, jerky gusts.

"Yes—I was a man once—young, proud, ambitious, and I was in love with the most beautiful woman that ever walked on the earth—your mother: Basilina. They had given her this name rightly, for she was royal queenly in every way. By birth one of the noblest in the land. Her family, the Anicians, had given Rome many of her finest men. I was in love with her from the first moment I saw her and I had hopes—hopes—"

There was the bitterness of hell in his laughter.

"Naturally I was not the only one who had set his heart on her, the beauty of beauties. But I had reason to hope—none of her other suitors could compete with me either in rank, power or wealth. And to me alone she showed signs—oh, chaste as a priestess, but signs—of her favour. Then came Constantinus."

"The late Emperor?"

"No, his eldest son. He is dead now."

There was grim hatred in the suave voice.

"He saw Basilina at Court and set himself to win her; he was not married then. Faced with a rival of such power all the others drew back—but not I! And I knew that Basilina did not love Constantinus. I knew—I hoped—she would remain firm. But the son of an Emperor is a powerful enemy. Fifty men stormed the summer villa where I lived, killed a

dozen of my slaves and took me prisoner. Constantinus himself came to see me in my cell, a tiny room in the cellar of one of his country seats. 'So that is the man who thinks himself my rival,' he said in a voice heavy with wine—he had come from a drinking bout; there was still a wreath of roses on his head. 'Very well, Mardonius, I'll give you your chance. Will you promise to leave immediately for Egypt, and never set eyes on Basilina again?' 'I will not,' I said.

"He laughed. 'I rather hoped you would refuse. I made my confession this morning to the Venerable Bishop and I mentioned that I wanted absolution for a bit of killing I intended to do to-night; but he was very angry with me. Thou shalt not kill and all the rest of it. I had to promise him that I would try other means if possible. So I gave you a chance. But now that you have refused—' But just then an idea struck him in his drunkenness. He laughed and laughed. 'I've got it!' he screamed. 'I won't kill you even now. Keep your wretched life. I'll just have you gelded, my friend—then go and play the suitor to pretty Basilina, hahaha.'

"I jumped up in my chains and tried to smash his head, but he had four of his guards with him and they just pushed me back. 'Kill me,' I said, 'but don't dishonour me.' He grinned, the dog. 'No, no—can't kill you—can't offend the Venerable Bishop. Eh, Rufinus—get the barber and his things—I'll have it done immediately.'

"Again I tried to get at him, but one of the guards must have clubbed me over the head with his spearshaft, for I don't remember anything that happened until I woke up with the sound of my own voice, screaming, screaming.

"I was back in my own house—a wreck, a hopeless, dishonoured wreck, unfit to live."

"My poor friend—"

Violently Mardonius shook his head. "I didn't tell you this story to be pitied. I don't want pity from anyone, least of all from Basilina's son."

Julian's heart missed a beat, his blood seemed to freeze.

"Mardonius! Did my mother—marry Constantinus?"

"No—she didn't. She rejected him like the wonderful woman she was. He did not gain anything through my elimination. I never saw her again, of course. I could not bear the idea of her pity."

"Forgive, my friend," begged Julian.

Mardonius avoided his eyes, so like those of his mother.

"An old friend of the family came to my aid; he was a pagan, the son of a priest of Zeus Soter, whom pious Christians had killed because he refused to forswear his belief."

"Oh, Mardonius, do you really believe that?"

"Wait and see, young Julian; wait until you see with your own eyes what they are doing, the meek lambs of the mild shepherd. Dion, my friend, nursed me back to health, physically and spiritually. When I had recovered, I travelled through unknown parts of the world—Nubia, Arabia, even India. Love had vanished from my life, but there were still things left that made life worth living. Knowledge for instance. I became insatiable for knowledge and many are the things I learned at the feet of holy men, and I don't mean your wretched Abbot Thomas.

"When I returned to Byzantium, Basilina was married to your father, the Emperor Constantine's brother, Julius Constantius."

"Julius Constantius—" repeated Julian. "Julius Constantius—Basilina—"

"Not even I could disapprove of her choice," went on Mardonius. "He was a very fine man, one of the most powerful nobles in the Empire, the son of Constantius Chlorus. And his mother was Theodora, the stepdaughter of Maximianus. Thus you, my friend, are Flavius Claudius Julianus, a prince of the Imperial blood. The present Emperor, Constantius, is your cousin."

The boy's pale face flushed deeply. But the next instant he lowered his head and folded his hands.

"Pride," he murmured. "The root of all sin: pride."

Mardonius, now again in complete control of himself, was watching him with a grim smile. Ten years' training in a monastery, from the tender age of seven, takes a lot of up-setting. But let's see—

"You didn't know that, did you, Julian? But Abbot Thomas knew; he told me so himself. He concealed it from you, carefully—"

"And for that I am thankful to him," said the young man softly. "It was the only way to teach me the spirit of true humility. Christ was the King of Kings, but for thirty years of His life He allowed Himself to be treated as an ordinary man."

"It is very noble of you to take it that way, Prince Julian," nodded Mardonius. "I only wish the motives of the Abbot had been equally worthy. But judge for yourself, when you have heard the rest of the story. A tremendous event took place when you were a boy of six: the Emperor Constantinus died. Now, zealous priests' and lickspittle historians are trying hard to depict him as a hero and a saint. But there were many who regarded him as one of the foulest tyrants that ever polluted the Imperial throne. In reality he

was a bit of both. Certainly he was a very great man, strong, active, dignified—a born Emperor and a fine general as well. But in his later years he became soft and that showed, as it would show, in degenerate effeminacy of habits and manners, and, quite logically, in the adoption of a weak, humble, naturally decadent belief. No, wait, Julian—contradict me later—if you can and wish to do so. Only on his death-bed Constantinus received baptism: and in his will he divided the Empire among his three sons, the very symbols of his own decline: Constantinus the Younger, my personal enemy, was to get Gaul; Constans became Master of Italy, Western Illyricum and Africa. All the East, with Byzantium, or as they now call it, Constantinople, with Syria, Pontus, Cappadocia, Egypt, was under Constantius.”

Again Mardonius got up and began to pace up and down in front of the small chair in which Julian was sitting.

“This is a history lecture,” he said grimly. “And it is being delivered to a man himself destined to become a figure in history, whether or not he wishes it. Indeed, he already *is* a historic figure, although he sees himself only as a humble little monk—which is just what his enemies want him to do. Listen carefully, Prince Julian: the first thing Constantius did, when he arrived in Constantinople for the funeral of his Imperial father, was to swear a solemn oath, pledging the security of his kinsmen. Almost the next thing he did, was to find a good reason to break it. A faked document was compiled—alleged to contain the testament of the dying Constantine—in which the Emperor accused his brother of having poisoned him and beseeching his sons to avenge his death.

“Constantius saw to it that the contents of this shameful document were spread among the army. The wild soldiery clamoured for the death of the culprits—and Constantius had to give in to the righteous fury of the people. . . .

“Flying squads of uniformed murderers were sent out, entering the houses of the guilty and slaughtering whomsoever they found.

“One of these squads fought its way into your father’s house, and the noble Julius was murdered—”

Mardonius stopped abruptly in front of the frail young figure in the chair.

“In those days, Prince Julian, all your family was put to death: your father, your brothers, your sisters, your uncles and cousins. Your mother may still be alive; there is just a chance. Her name is not on the registers of the dead. Except for her, you are the only member of the family alive; you were a boy of six, and not even Constantius could think that

you were dangerous to his throne at that age. But all the same he wanted to make sure: and thus the worthy Bishop of Nicomedia was to become your first jailer and Abbot Thomas, that saintly old man, your next. There in Macellum, in a tiny monastery, they would bring you up in a spirit of abject humility, carefully segregated from any influence that could make you aware of your rank, your full name, and your real position in life. You would become a monk, not a man; a priest, not a prince; an ignoramus, not a man of education; the Empire would be nothing to you, so that others could rule it as they thought fit. Oh, I know, you may think that instead of a worldly throne you have gained a spiritual crown, but I must ask you, what spiritual crown could these men give you who deliberately told you one lie after another, who spun a spider's web around you, not for the sake of your soul, but in order to emasculate you, to do to you spiritually what they did to me physically? Through a coincidence—but what am I saying? through the will of Providence, I found out the carefully guarded secret: that one member of that family of martyrs was still alive—and where.

"I decided not to rest until I had found you, rescued you, even if you were guarded by all the hundred and thirty-two legions of the Empire and by a legion of seven-horned devils or saints as well. I knew that, in the atmosphere of that wretched place, you could never see the truth. I had to get you out, whatever the cost. I found you, and I got you out. Quickly, too—for Constantius has been beaten by the Persians at Singara, and a beaten emperor is doubly dangerous to those whom he can beat in turn. Constantius may, or may not, have decided to send you on an errand, to find your father's shadow. I had to prevent that. Hence the haste of our journey. Hence the wrong information that I gave the Tribune. And hence our arrival here at night. This, Prince Julian, is your history up to date. It has been done to you, without your knowledge. So far you have been a puppet. From now on you can make history yourself."

Julian also got up. He made a few halting, uncertain steps towards the eunuch. His face was very white.

"What you have told me, was new to me, all of it," he said hoarsely. "I knew nothing, nothing at all. And yet, somehow, I always believed, I didn't know I believed, but I did, that I was different from them—just different. Now I understand. Blood is a strange thing, isn't it, Mardonius? I wonder—"

He stared hard, past the eunuch, into the distance, across the garden, the soft hill, the strand and the sea, into infinity.

"The Emperor is my cousin," he said slowly, as though

weighing every word before allowing it to go. "And the Emperor killed my father and my family. My mother may be alive—and I—"

He spun round. Mardonius saw his eyes and for the first time they were not like his mother's; there was a hard, steely glint in them, like that of the broadsword that conquered the world; there was a spark in them that told a tale of burning cities and the wailing of men, of will set against will, and of Rome triumphant; there was nothing of the young monk in those eyes and no humility in his voice.

"Mardonius—the Emperor is afraid of me—is he?"

CHAPTER X

"Quite impossible," said Cherubaal, stuffing a flamingo tongue into his generous mouth. "I can't fit anybody in. Lady Volumnia is coming to see me in half an hour about her new lover. There's been a spot of trouble. I knew there would be, but try and tell that to a woman of fifty-two. Then there is the Master of the Horse coming at noon, I know what *he* wants, and he is going to get it, even if I have to *make* the Emperor dream of it. Then luncheon. Then five, no, six engagements, almost all with people that matter. And I *must* work out the monthly forecast for Augusta Constantina, to whom God and so on—I'm a very busy man, Kamil, I really am. Who's this fellow anyway? Give me the plate of flamingo tongues, they're good, better than usual. Who's this fellow who doesn't know that appointments with me can't be made on the spot? Have a tongue yourself, Kamil, they're good. Who is he, why don't you tell me, I've asked you three times, what's the matter with you?"

"Name is Mardonius," said the Nubian dwarf in broken Greek, and he took one of the tiny tongues and began to chew it. He was quite accustomed to the fact that he could rarely get a word in edgeways with his master; he had resigned himself to it and was quite unruffled by it.

Cherubaal jumped up quickly. The hem of his full black dress was caught between the chair and desk. He staggered and might have fallen if the dwarf had not caught him time.

"Mardonius! Why didn't you say so? you imbecile—wait a minute—I'd better draw a horary figure for the moment. You never know with *that* fellow. By Astaroth's breasts, this is the first time for months that anyone's come to see me

that I didn't know why—refreshing thing for a change. Show him in. Run. Run, you monster!”

The dwarf grinned and ran.

Cherubaa! sat down again and made a few hasty calculations for his horary figure, using cyphers that few men could read.

He grunted and coughed and muttered to himself. Then he got up again and draped his black dress around his lean little body. Hem and wide sleeves were embroidered with Chaldean glyphs. A chain of amethysts hung round his scraggy neck. His wizened face with its short flat nose, almost lipless mouth and black eyes shifting restlessly about, gave him a monkey-like appearance, and a good many people called him the shy-monkey behind his back, though no one would have dared to call him that to his face.

As the Imperial astrologer, Cherubaa! was one of the few people who could enter the Sacrum Cubiculum, the sleeping room of the Emperor without being formally announced, except by the body-servant Draco—a prerogative Cherubaa! used only with the greatest discretion. He had held his office ever since Constantius' emperorship, a full twelve years now, an almost unheard of thing for an Imperial astrologer.

When Mardonius was ushered in by the dwarf, Cherubaa! fluttered up to him, both hands outstretched, a big black crow rather than a monkey—uttering little shrieks of delight.

“My dear Mardonius, what joy, what a lovely surprise for your old friend, welcome to you, welcome indeed, where have you been? Why haven't you come before? It must be years since I last saw you. By Astaroth's eyes, you look as many years younger, how do you do it? But you don't say anything.”

“It was impossible.” Mardonius smiled. “Still fond of flamingo tongues, I see.”

“Have one—have the lot, they're good, better than usual. I've got a new cook, had to dismiss the old one, because Psammeti tried to make use of him.”

“Who is Psammeti?”

“Who is Psammeti? Won't you sit down? Who is Psammeti? Thank you for not knowing of him, the foul villain, the stinking cheating son of an illegitimate fishwife; he calls himself an Egyptian, from Memphis, or what is left of it, and he professes to have studied the science and art of the stars. The wretch—all he ever did was a bit of fortune telling among the moneyed people of Ephesus, where they're ready to believe anything anyway—his only chance, of course. He tried to buy himself support in the Palace, with one of

the chamberlains, I won't tell you which one, you'll hear about his funeral soon enough, but that wasn't very satisfactory, oh no, so when Psammeti found it would take him a couple of years to make any headway, he decided to buy my cook instead and one day there was a funny smell about my turbot; just the ghost of a smell, but a smell, all the same. Now you know what my turbot are like, the real thing I mean, fed on goose liver for years, I've still got a few—and that same day I had certain constellations in my horoscope and in such circumstances I am particularly suspicious of any sort of bad smell. I fed a cat with a tiny piece of the turbot and before you could have said a short prayer, the cat was a corpse! So, off goes my cook. Have some more flamingo tongues, won't you?"

"Thanks," said Mardonius. "I had rather a late breakfast. You're very busy, I take it—"

"Overworked, my dear fellow, overworked. I'm carrying the troubles of the entire civilised world from His Majesty, to whom God and so on—downwards."

Mardonius nodded understandingly.

"I'll be as brief as I can then—"

"Oh don't bother to be brief," cried the little astrologer. "I have time for you, you know that. *You* wouldn't ever come to me with fools' ideas."

"I'm not so sure about that," doubted Mardonius.

"Go away, Kamil," said Cherubaal. his beady eyes fixed on Mardonius. "And when Lady Volumnia turns up, tell her that I'm in a deep trance and mustn't be disturbed for fear of endangering my life. Tell her I'm free to-morrow in the ninth hour and my message to her is, 'There will be good news by then.' That'll keep her going. Now off with you. You'll stay for lunch, Mardonius? My new cook is a miracle."

Mardonius bowed. "I should be charmed, my friend, but not only because of the cook."

"Kamil, Kamil—where is that misbegotten son of calamity? Kamil!"

When the dwarf appeared; "Wine," said Cherubaal. "The best, some of the Fundi Falernian. I don't know whether you will agree with me, Mardonius, but I seriously think that the Italian wines are underrated here. I'd sell you the whole of Chios for one harvest of Fundi or of the blessed region around Vesuvius. Wine from the slopes of a volcano has all the subterranean fire in its soul. Wooden goblets, Kamil—wood, not metal, is the true armour of Bacchus. Now then, friend—tell me all about it."

"All about what?"

Cherubaal grinned.

"Come, come, Mardonius, no one comes to see the old stargazer without a reason. They all want something. Some want encouragement, many want comfort, sympathy, promises, thrills—a few even want the truth, though hardly anyone can bear it, least of all those who say they can. Whenever anyone says to me, 'tell me everything, I can bear the truth,' I know I've got to be specially careful. Thirty years ago—I was much younger then—I told a man the whole truth at his request, and he promptly had a stroke and died in my consulting room, which is hellishly bad publicity."

The dwarf reappeared with the wine in a large amphora and goblets of terebinth wood, beautifully carved. He filled them with the dark red wine and withdrew silently.

"Well, Cherubaal," said Mardonius, "how is my highly respected friend, the Empress Eusebia?"

"Eusebia, to whom God and so on—she's not too well, a bit delicate you know, nothing serious though. Not yet, in any case."

Mardonius eyed him suspiciously.

"You don't think anything is going to happen to her in the near future, do you?"

"Oh no, no, no—not to Eusebia. The Emperor loves her dearly, he really does. It's been quite a riddle to me for some time, for Constantius can't love anybody really, it's not in his nature. But I've got the solution of the riddle; he loves her, because she's so devoted to him that he can rely on her. She is about the only person among those around him who isn't in the least selfish. He appreciates that and he's flattered at being loved for his own sake. He can't do without her. It's a damned lonely business being an Emperor. I'd rather be Cherubaal, the astrologer, any day—though I'm a lonely man too. But then, I've got all the stars as companions."

The Chaldean's ugly face lit up as he said that.

Mardonius nodded slowly.

"You do love them, your stars, don't you, Cherubaal?"

"Yes, I love them. The nights I've spent looking at them, talking to them, listening to them—and they never lie, Mardonius, never. Astrologers lie a lot, they've got to. They err a lot—even I do, although I'm pretty good. But the stars never lie. There's a queer sense of humour in their twinkle, you know. Yes, I love them."

Mardonius sipped his Falernian. "You've cast the Empress' horoscope, of course," he said thoughtfully. "I suppose she will go on living for some time. But is she going to have children—ever?"

The astrologer's eyes narrowed a little. "Now, that's a question, isn't it, Mardonius? Why do you want to know that?"

"Well, I'm a citizen of the Empire, just as you are. And like you, my mind sometimes dwells on the future. The Empress is childless—if she remains childless—"

"—who is going to be Constantius' successor?" The Chaldean nodded. "Yes, that is the question."

"It must be very much on the Emperor's mind—" Mardonius held his goblet up to be refilled. His shrewd eyes were fixed on the Chaldean's face. "And therefore it should be very much on the mind of the Emperor's chief adviser."

"The Emperor's chief adviser is Eusebius, *Præpositus Sacri Cubiculi*," said the astrologer with a wry face. "And he has nothing in common with the late lamented Bishop of Nicomedia, except the name. But he is loyal to Constantius for reasons almost as good as those of the Empress."

"How's that?"

"Well, the Empress, whom God and so on, is loyal to the Emperor, because she loves him, and the *Præpositus Eusebius* is loyal because no one loves the *Præpositus Eusebius*. If Constantius died to-day, Eusebius would be cut to pieces within an hour."

"By whom?"

"Oh, everybody. Except for Paulus, Arbatio and Mercurius, he is the most hated man in the Empire. Surely you know that! If I remember rightly you had a bit of a tussle with him yourself, hadn't you?"

The eunuch shrugged his shoulders. "You are according me more honour than I deserve, my friend. I am a thoroughly unpolitical person, really. The position of the First Imperial Chamberlain does not attract me in the least."

"But you are wealthy, Mardonius—very wealthy, they say, and that is most attractive to men like Paul and Mercurius. They've brought denouncing to a fine art since the law giving half of the convicted man's fortune to the denouncer was introduced."

"There are ways and means of dealing with people of that sort," said Mardonius contemptuously. "You aren't warning me professionally, are you, Cherubaal?"

"By Astaroth's white arms, I wouldn't dream of dragging the professional side into a friendly discussion. It's contrary to all etiquette." The astrologer seemed quite hurt.

"I didn't mean that, Cherubaal," said Mardonius, hurriedly. "But I would like your professional advice in a certain matter. Could you possibly spend a little of your time on the interpretation of a horoscope I have drawn—as you know I have a little knowledge of the stars myself, although I'd never dare to call myself an astrologer for that reason."

"Certainly I will work for you, with pleasure—"

Cherubaal took the strip of parchment from his guest's hand and began to study the curious lines and signs on it with visible interest.

"Is it a man or a woman?" he asked.

The matter of sex is one of the things which a horoscope does not disclose.

"A man, Cherubaal."

"Most interesting," murmured the astrologer. His face was very serious; the skin over his cheekbones was taut, and his lips were moving incessantly. There was nothing monkey-like about him now.

Mardonius was still watching him. He had known the little Chaldean a good many years and he knew he was about the best man in the Empire for his job.

"This is an amazing document," said Cherubaal. "He should be about—what is it?—nineteen? Yes. So young—but he will always be young, they'll always talk about his youth, whatever he does. He could go far, in fact he will. Much depends, of course, on his position in life. An Emperor's son and a craftsman's son may be born at the same time and thus have the same horoscope, but they will have different potentialities due to their different positions in life. From what sort of family does your young man come?"

"The best, Cherubaal."

"The best," murmured the Chaldean. "Nothing less than that, eh? I wish you'd leave this horoscope with me, Mardonius, I'd like to work on it. There are a few points in this chart that require very exact interpretation, if they are not to be misleading. I haven't seen a chart like this for a long, long time."

"Let us talk a little first," said the eunuch and he snatched the parchment out of Cherubaal's hand.

"Eh, what are you doing? Give it back to me."

The little astrologer looked exactly like a child whose toy had been taken away from him.

"Later, my friend, later." Mardonius laughed. "At present you still owe me the answer to a question."

"Question? Question? Oh yes—the successor of— Oh! I see, I begin to see, or at least I think I do. But how is it possible? Mardonius, what *are* you up to?"

The eunuch leaned forward.

"I suppose you see now that this is really serious, Cherubaal? And by Hecate Triformis, you're right. I'm here not only as your friend. I'm here in my capacity as Chief Priest of Jupiter—"

Cherubaal fairly jumped.

"You—the Chief Priest? I knew, of course, that you belonged—but the Chief Priest? Impossible—"

"—and therefore as your superior," said Mardonius.

The little astrologer stared at him. Fear, doubt, confusion were wrestling in the wizened little face.

"I don't know what you're talking about, Mardonius," he stammered. "Jupiter—you can't mean—what have I got to do with this? I'm a Christian, of course—"

"You are an initiate of the Fifth degree," said Mardonius. "Need I remind you of your duty, when addressing an adept of the Seventh?"

With his left hand he made a curious gesture and his lips formed a word that may not be spoken.

Cherubaal fell on his knees. His face was grey and old.

"The Pontifex commands," he stammered. "I obey."

"The time of the crucifixion of the Cross is approaching," whispered Mardonius. "But at present we must make use of the same formula which the holy carpenter once prescribed for his followers: 'Be ye therefore wise as serpents.' Now answer me, Cherubaal, has the Emperor named anyone as his successor?"

"No, there was a rumour a few weeks ago, but it was unfounded."

"Has the Empress still any hopes of having a child?"

"You know what women are, they can never resign themselves to facts, when their emotions are involved. But she knows that there is practically no hope. She is barren."

"Have you told her so?"

"Not directly. It would be too great a shock for her delicate health."

"You will prepare her now, break it to her gently, if you wish, but she must know the facts."

"I will prepare her," murmured Cherubaal.

"More," said Mardonius. "You must impress on her that in spite of that the only solution of the problem lies within the Constantian family itself."

"But the family is extinct," gasped Cherubaal. "Constantinus the Younger died childless—Constans does not incline toward women—and Constantius will never give up Eusebia."

"Never mind that," said Mardonius with an enigmatic smile. "Do what you are told."

"I will. I will. But that chart, the chart of the young man —" Cherubaal was trembling now—"the horoscope you showed me just now—is it—?"

"It is the chart of the man whom the Emperor will adopt —" said Mardonius calmly. "He is a relation—a Constantian."

If you had had time to study it longer, you would have found that it is he who will give us back the gods of our fathers and that with him will begin what the Empire and the world have been waiting for: the golden age. . . ."

CHAPTER XI

The powerful Spanish horses raced through the streets at such speed that only a miracle could have prevented a whole series of accidents. They were taking the shortest route from the Western Gate to the Palace, through the Jewish quarter, the market of the carpet merchants, and past the new Basilica of St. John, which was to be consecrated the next month.

The small chariot was lurching dangerously, and it took all the skill of an experienced charioteer not to overturn it.

"Faster, Thrax," said Eusebius in his thin, nasal voice.

The burly charioteer gave him a quick look. "Green in the face already, but he wants me to go faster," he thought. "We've killed two old women back at the toll-bridge, but *he* doesn't mind." He cracked his whip over the heads of the four horses and they plunged forward.

A couple of fruit sellers raced their clumsy carts for safety - and a thin wave of angry, frightened, warning screams rushed before them, a vanguard of sound.

"Faster, Thrax," said the First Chamberlain.

The charioteer grinned. "With all due respect, Illustrious, but if I do go faster, which I can't, I'd promote you to First Chamberlain of the heavenly Court, instead of the Emperor's."

"Shut up," said Eusebius. "Keep your eyes on the road."

Poisonous toad, thought Thrax. It'd serve you right if we crash into a brick wall. But that would make my old woman a widow and little Aula an orphan.

He careered round the thermes of Constantine and passed the Imperial riding school.

They'll think I'm crazy, he thought grimly. What *is* old Poisonous in such a hurry for, I'd like to know. Damned busybody. Always in the Emperor's ear, rot his soul. Well, we've done it, thank Christ, Venus and Hermes.

They had reached the Palace and the Guards, recognising the First Chamberlain, opened the heavy iron gates.

The chariot, with almost undiminished speed, thundered into the courtyard; only now Thrax leaned back, not a moment too soon. The chariot stopped dead in front of the

main entrance and half a dozen slaves, in the red livery of the Imperial household, rushed to Eusebius' aid.

The First Chamberlain got out with some difficulty.

The slaves, accustomed to seeing him arrive in his huge, majestic litter, or one of his spacious coaches with a fore-rider, escort and rearguard, exchanged looks of alarm.

The First Chamberlain was a eunuch, and very near his seventieth year. Unlike most of his kind, he was thin and scrawny, but at present his body was completely hidden by a heavy cloak of Persian wool. His face was a death mask, a wide slit instead of a mouth, a blunt nose, sallow skin. There was not a single hair on his head. His eyes, as always, were half closed.

As he hurried up the stairs, he looked strangely like a tortoise walking upright for greater speed.

The officer of the guard saluted deferentially and did not even receive a nod of acknowledgment.

Three officials ran to meet him, all men of rank and importance.

"Where is the Emperor?" asked Eusebius.

"In the Small Audience Room, Illustrious."

The First Chamberlain stormed on, along endless corridors; gold-glittering officers, jewel-glittering ladies of the Court, dukes and counts of the Golden Belt bowed to him, but they received no acknowledgment either.

Doors, staircases, corridors—a labyrinth of corridors, intersecting in all directions, covered with carpets in red and black designs.

The Small Reception Room. The Big Reception Room. The Chapel, with the scent of incense from the morning Mass. The Emperor's Small Staircase. The Emperor's Meditation Room.

Bowing heads and oily smiles. The guards' abrupt salutes flashing up.

At last, a wave of voices from the next room, the Small Audience Room.

Twelve guards at the door, crashing their gilded spearshafts on the floor, six-footers, all of them, the Domestics, the Lifeguards, picked men from all provinces of the Empire.

The old man shuffled into the room filled with people, and everybody drew back, right and left, legates, præfects, patricians, officials, citizens with petitions and without, women of almost every walk of life.

"He wore a coat of many colours and thought himself more than his brothers," murmured General Ursicinus to General Nevitta. Nevitta grinned, although he had never

opened a Bible in his life, for the simple reason that he could not read. But for all that he was a good general.

Eusebius sailed past them, reached the three steps leading to the Imperial Throne and prostrated himself.

Even in this prostration there seemed to be something urgent, almost commanding, and the rigid figure on the throne stirred slightly, very slightly, and a slender finger with an enormous ruby beckoned him.

How the First Chamberlain, prostrate as etiquette demanded, saw this was hard to guess; perhaps he felt it with an intuition acquired from two generations of Court life; perhaps he did not either see or feel, but acted of his own accord.

In any case he got up, amazingly agile, drew himself up to his full height, raised his arm and said in the sudden stillness:

"The audience is postponed."

Immediately a chain of Domestics appeared from nowhere.

Under the gentle pressure of their slow but inexorable advance, the public began to move backwards. At the same time the four big doors leading to the corridor opened wide, and the petitioners were squeezed out. There were about two hundred of them, but in less than two minutes they were all outside.

Again the First Chamberlain raised his arm.

"The Court will assemble in the Ebony Hall," he called out.

The few remaining military and civil officials also withdrew. There was no need for them to be ushered out.

The Domestics followed, glittering in gold and red.

At a curt sign from Eusebius, the twelve Lifeguards, right and left of the throne, followed.

Only Draco remained. A huge man, in full armour, with helmet, shield and short spear. He had been Constantius' bodyguard for twenty years; he slept on his doorstep, a faithful dog.

"Go, Draco," said Eusebius and Draco clanked out of the room.

At last Emperor and First Chamberlain were alone.

Constantius had been sitting rigidly erect, hands on his knees, for more than an hour. He was not tired, though, as audiences lasted up to three and even four hours, and there were few people who had ever seen him move. He was rather proud of his ability to remain the symbol of Imperial Majesty in the presence of the Court and the people.

His slight figure was covered by the wide purple cloak of the shade only the Emperor was allowed to wear; it was bordered by the clavus—a broad golden band—covered with precious stones, and worth the income of an entire province. His face was carefully made up and immobile. It was not an impressive face—the eyes were shifty and the mouth weak. The heavy cloak seemed to get the better of him.

He was clean shaven. The dark brown hair was laid in short glossy curls around the low forehead.

When the heavy door had closed behind Draco, the Emperor got up.

"One of these days you'll go too far, Eusebius," he said plaintively. "We have been very patient with you—much too patient. What is the matter now? Who told you to break off the audience? Some people say we have a certain amount of influence with you, Eusebius; we are not at all sure whether they are right."

The old eunuch had listened as a mother listens to the complaints of a spoilt child. Now he spoke, quietly and with a self-assurance of which the Emperor had always been envious.

"Divine Emperor, your slave Eusebius is old—nigh on seventy; and yet he has driven here from Heraclea in two days and two nights, in a chariot instead of a coach, in order to report to you. There are reports which do not bear an hour's delay."

"Bad news," said Constantius. "We thought so when we saw you coming in. Bad news. What is it?—out with it. No, we'll guess. Your coming from Heraclea. Has something happened to our sister Constantina?"

"No, Divine Emperor."

"Pity," said Constantius. "She's an uncommon bitch. We don't envy her next husband. We'd rather be married to the Gorgon. Have the Sarmatians arisen again, then? Or—" he paled under the makeup—"or have you discovered another conspiracy? Speak, Eusebius, you know we can bear the truth."

"I have grave news for the Divine Emperor," said the First Chamberlain, calmly. "The Divine Emperor's august brother has lost his life."

Constantius twitched nervously. "Constans? Dead? Why? How? Who did it?"

Not for one moment did he consider the possibility of death from natural causes.

"Magnentius did it," said the First Chamberlain. "And he has done worse."

"The purple?" asked the Emperor, now very pale.

"Yes, Divine Emperor. He had conspired against Your Majesty's brother with a number of mutinous officers and high officials of Gaul. The Jovian and Herculean troops were all for him anyway. In Autun he gave a feast to five hundred important people from all parts of Gaul; after midnight, when everyone was drunk, he put a diadem on his head, assumed a purple cloak and had himself proclaimed as Emperor of the West."

"Dirty barbarian," said Constantius. "What have we come to! But where was Constans?"

"The Divine Emperor's brother was in a little hunting lodge, with a number of friends," said the First Chamberlain, and the way in which he said it, made the nature of the party very clear.

Constantius laughed shrilly.

"We knew his vice would kill him one day," he cried. "Sodom and Gomorrha were destroyed, why not the Emperor's brother? Did they catch him in the arms of a friend?"

"No, Sire. He was warned at the very last moment and fled, but Magnentius sent a detachment of cavalry after him and he was killed in Helena, near the frontier of Gaul and Iberia."

"In Grandmother's town?" The Emperor bit his lip. "That we shall not forget," he said in a voice that was unnaturally calm.

"The usurper has sent envoys to Constantinople," said Eusebius. "They are on their way here now."

"Then they haven't arrived yet?"

"It was to forestall them that your servant raced here with such speed, Sire," said Eusebius. "The envoys will be here in three days, probably to assure Your Majesty of the loyal intentions of Magnentius to the Empire of the East. He can't afford to do too much at a time."

Constantius nodded.

"We shall have to think hard," he said. "Poor Constans, what a bother it will be to have the Court in mourning again. Take my damned cloak off, Eusebius; it's as heavy as the pyramid."

The First Chamberlain obeyed and spread the purple, stiff with encrusted jewels, over the throne.

Constantius began to pace up and down.

"There's one thing to be said for the whole business," he said. "Just one thing—"

The First Chamberlain allowed himself the ghost of a smile.

"Certainly, Sire. Your Majesty is now the only legitimate ruler of the Empire."

"Quite, quite—" Constantius rubbed his hands. "Mag-

nentius is impossible, of course. Why, the man hasn't even a drop of Roman blood in his veins."

"But even that did not prevent him from complaining that Your Majesty was ruining the Empire by employing too many barbarians in high places—"

The Emperor broke into an angry laugh. "Certainly by leaving him in high office we would do so. We will crush this impertinent upstart—"

"How, Sire? Your Majesty's best troops are on the Persian frontier."

Constantius stamped his foot.

"You always see things in their worst light, Eusebius. What do you want me to do? Go and kiss Magnentius for murdering my brother?"

"I advise prudence. Your Majesty must receive the usurper's emissaries when they arrive. It is necessary, politically."

"Yes, yes." Constantius was visibly pleased. "You're quite right. We shall receive them, and we shan't say a single word. We'll just let them do all the talking, without showing the slightest reaction. That's most impressive, I always think, and one can't make mistakes that way. Then you get up, and say we will let them know in due course. Yes, we like that. We'll get even with this upstart. We're not in the least worried."

"As befits the son of the great Constantinus," said the First Chamberlain unctuously.

"Don't invoke the shade of our father; he has left us a heavy burden, so heavy, that in his wisdom, he thought it should be divided among his sons. And what was the consequence? First, Constans goes and kills his elder brother, then he gets killed himself, and now we are carrying the burden all alone."

He began to pace up and down again.

"We've got to do something, Eusebius. Calling up the troops isn't enough. Besides, we simply can't take them away from the East. Sapor, the old fox, would make use of such an opportunity quick enough. We must have sufficient troops there, at least for defence, and we must have a commander there too. But whom? We can't afford another rising, when we're fighting Magnentius, can we? And we can't divide ourselves in two, can we? So what are we going to do, can you tell us that, um?"

"General Nevitta, perhaps—"

"No, no, no. Thank you very much. Not another barbarian."

"Or General Barbatio?"

"Your cousin? He's a good soldier, I know, but politically . . ."

"Quite trustworthy, Sire."

"Maybe, maybe, but we wouldn't like to take the risk, Eusebius," Constantius smiled wanly. "You're a little too ambitious for your own family, you know. It was quite clever of you to suggest Nevitta first, knowing that we wouldn't agree, and only after that to mention your own choice. No, don't be offended, Eusebius. We like your intelligence, we understand it well, being no fool ourselves; and we are grateful to your loyalty, you have rendered us great service to-day—"

The eunuch bowed deeply.

"The Emperor's service is my only care," he said.

"Of course, of course—by the way, your secret service must be excellent—we've had no news of all this; that is, almost no news. However, we must consider what steps to take. We shall meditate. We shall also confer with the Empress, and we shall let you know. . . ."

The eunuch withdrew. He was not satisfied with the result of his audience. Sometimes Constantius could be shrewd. It would be difficult now to get Barbatio into office. He wondered a little about the Emperor's "meditation," too. There was no streak of sentimentality in Constantius—only self-pity and suspicion. But there was superstition. He still believed in the fantastic nonsense of "Imperial blood." True, most of his relatives had been . . . eliminated. But two of them were still alive, although neither of them knew of the existence of the other. Two brothers. Young Gallus and young Julian. It was a secret of which only very few people knew. Gallus, the older one, was soldiering somewhere in Thrace, far away from civilisation and of course under constant surveillance! And Julian was in a Cappadocian monastery. Eusebius gritted his teeth. Whatever he may meditate about, he thought, I hope it won't be those two young vipers.

CHAPTER XII

Eusebia was having her bath, very late as usual, when Thais announced that a visit from the Emperor was imminent.

"What? At this hour? Something must have happened. Help me out, Thais—this is awful. Have you any idea what it's about?"

"No, Your Majesty."

The Empress came out of the tepid, richly scented water like a tired porpoise. She was only thirty-seven, but she had put on weight lately, especially round the hips.

The eight slaves of the tepidarium busied themselves around her, draping her in a large towel, and lifting her bodily on to a couch, where they started rubbing her gently.

"Who told you?" asked the Empress, gasping a little from the massage. "Was it—Eu—Eusebius?"

"No, Your Majesty. It was Messalla."

"The Aide-de-Camp or the Senator?"

"The young one—I mean the Aide-de-Camp, Your Majesty."

Eusebia laughed. "So that's the way you divide men up, is it? Just 'old men' and 'young men'—"

Thais blushed under her dark skin.

"I'm sorry, Your Majesty, I shouldn't have—"

"Nonsense." The Empress was being turned over and now she lay face downwards. She grunted contentedly under the skilful massage. "You're young, Thais, why shouldn't you look at men? Messalla is good-looking, I suppose."

"I assure Your Majesty, I never—"

"Tush, child! It's sinful to tell an untruth and you were just going to, now. Of course Messalla is good-looking, and of course you're well aware of it, and why not? He's like a Roman of the old days, when Rome was Rome. Have you ever been in Rome, Thais?"

"No, Your Majesty."

"You've missed nothing. It's the most unhealthy, crowded, evil-smelling place. How anybody in his senses could live there is quite beyond me. It was very wise of my father-in-law to make Byzantium the new capital; but, then, he was a very wise man, God bless his memory and soul—and a very great man, too. You're rubbing me too hard, Callistho—I'm not made of ox-hide, you know—it's just as well the Emperor sent Messalla. Whenever he sends Eusebius, it always means bad news."

"Eusebius interrupted the audience this morning, they say—His Majesty was angry," chattered Thais.

"The Illustrious Eusebius, to you, my child," said the Empress in gentle but firm reproof. "I can't bear the old man, but he's a loyal servant. I'm quite dry now, Callistho—the simple hair set, Arete; we mustn't keep the Emperor waiting. I want Elpis here with the dresses, and everybody else in the vestiarius, I'm in a frightful hurry."

But even the simple hair set took two experienced girls over half an hour. Eusebia's hair was naturally wavy, but

the fashion demanded tiny curls, soft and glossy like spun silk and powdered with gold dust.

Once or twice she had to tell the girls to work faster, knowing all the time that they were doing their very best, and hating herself for demanding impossibilities. I would only do it for him, she thought. Not for myself, *you* know that, Holy Mother of God. I do so hate being rushed. What can it all be about? And why did Eusebius interrupt the audience this morning? Why did he come back from Heraclea? If Thais had been a little cleverer, she might have wormed it out of Messalla, but of course she is only interested in his looks. He's a nice boy, too; we'll have to marry him off to one of Senator Attilianus' girls. They're so pretty, and good creatures too, except for the youngest. But then the youngest of a family is always a bit of a problem, I suppose—

Now Thais was starting on her daily job of painting the Empress' face. First, the cream that still covered her face was carefully removed with rose-oil, then a base of day-cream, specially prepared for her by an Ephesian merchant, the recipe being kept a secret, of course; then the actual make-up, applied with a dozen tiny brushes of various shapes and sizes.

In her home—Alexandria—Thais had been well known as a painter; but her father had got into debt, and the only way to save him from prison, was for his daughter to give up her freedom.

Eusebia, always anxious to have slaves with some background, heard her story and bought her—for a very substantial sum—in the market at Alexandria: the letter, giving her back her freedom, was written and sealed in Eusebia's desk. But at present she had no intention of letting her go. Her skill was far too rare and valuable.

She treated Eusebia's face like a portrait, or, as the Empress herself jestingly put it, like a dish to be appetisingly and freshly prepared every day.

It was not an arduous task. At thirty-seven, the Empress was still a good-looking woman. Her eyes, under the low forehead, were brown, large and round, with long lashes; "the cow-eyed goddess" malicious tongues used to call her behind her back, after Homer's famous description of the wife of the supreme god of pagan times. The nose was straight and well-modelled, though perhaps a trifle too heavy; the mouth really beautiful, except for the paleness of the lips. It was this paleness, more than anything else, that showed her delicate health.

Thousands and thousands of pieces of gold had been spent on her health, on rare medicines and brews, imported from

the most remote parts of the Empire and even from beyond its frontiers.

But when Thais had finished, the pale lips were healthy and natural-looking, and the face of her Mistress looked ten years younger than her age, and fifteen years younger than half an hour before.

Eusebia rose, in naked majesty, an Olympian goddess.

Three young Greek women approached to dress her and their movements had almost musical accuracy and rhythm—it was as though elves were putting together the fallen petals of a yellow rose. The transformation took only a moment, and from a naked goddess Eusebia changed to a lady, perfectly dressed in a robe of orange-coloured Chinese silk and a short cloak falling in classic folds over her left shoulder.

Old Chalcedis came with the jewel box, which she had opened so that the Empress might choose.

"The rubies, Chalcedis—"

A beautiful Circassian girl appeared with a tray on which six pairs of sandals were laid out. After one glance at the Empress' dress and jewellery she took the matching pair, knelt down and let the small white feet slip into them; they were made of soft, gilded antelope skin and studded with rubies.

Ildriz, a tiny brown-skinned woman of Arabian descent, came last with the perfume-tray, containing a dozen phials with stoppers of gold, ivory and jade.

The Empress chose her perfume for the day and Ildriz applied it with infinite care to her neck and arms, and sprinkled it on her hair.

"The mirror, Didyma."

It was a three-foot disc of polished silver and the slender slave girl handled it with the skill of a gladiator swinging his shield in the arena, anticipating exactly what her Mistress wished to see and at what distance.

"That'll do." Eusebia nodded. "Thank you, girls. Well done, all of you."

A little chorus of delight rose from the lips of the slaves, exclamations of gratitude mingled with real or feigned admiration.

Two ladies-in-waiting appeared, and Eusebia accepted their deep curtsies and honeyed compliments with a gracious smile.

"His Majesty is coming up the small staircase," reported the velaria, the curtain slave.

"Very well."

The little procession made its way to the Blue Room, which the Empress used to hold receptions for her intimate

friends. First the two ladies-in-waiting, then Eusebia, then two Egyptian slaves with enormous fans made of ostrich plumes.

The Emperor was announced by Marcus Messalla. He came in slowly, holding himself stiffly. It was shortly after noon, a most unusual hour for a visit.

There was the customary exchange of polite greetings and a ceremonial kiss on Eusebia's forehead. Then: "We must speak to you alone, Eusebia."

Messalla, the ladies-in-waiting and the slaves disappeared.

"Interesting news," said Constantius. "Constans, the poor idiot, has got himself killed by Magnentius. Magnentius has proclaimed himself Emperor of the West, his envoys are on their way here, and I really don't know what to do."

Eusebia burst into tears, very much to her distress, as she knew how much her husband hated weeping. She tried hard to control herself.

Fortunately Constantius was so preoccupied with his own thoughts that he did not seem to be aware of her emotion at all. He was pacing up and down the room, hands clasped behind his back. There was nothing ceremonious about him now.

"It's a great nuisance," he said. "And it's also, perhaps, a very good solution. Constans might have been an excellent courtesan, but he was a very bad ruler."

"He was your brother, Constantius," said Eusebia gently. "And your blessed father loved him."

"Oh yes—more than he loved me. I've not come to be comforted in my grief as head of the family. I've come because I want to think."

Eusebia nodded silently. It was not the first time that her husband had come to her simply because "he wanted to think." There was something about her presence that helped him, possibly because he felt that his thoughts were really safe with her, and with her alone. Also she never wanted anything for herself and she never had an axe to grind.

"Is Magnentius very dangerous?" she asked.

Constantius shrugged his narrow shoulders.

"Yes—and no. More yes than no, perhaps. He's got about thirty thousand men. Herculeans and Jovians, Spaniards and Gauls; and a few German auxiliaries. Ursicin thinks he can get forty thousand together in a few months. He has money, but he hasn't got many first-raters among his officers, though he is a first-rater himself. Ursicin told me that. He knows him quite well. I've wormed all this out of him without telling him anything, of course."

"What sort of a man is this Magnentius?"

"Excellent soldier—bit of an opportunist. Haughty and arrogant. Comes from a barbarian stock, and doesn't want it to be known. No statesman, not even a diplomat."

The Empress had recovered.

"You will win against him," she said. "I'm sure of that. God will not let a usurper win against the rightful master."

Constantius laughed a little, then hastily crossed himself and murmured a short prayer.

"It's all very well," he resumed, "but I must get troops to beat him, and I can only get them from the East, from the Persian frontier. But I must leave enough troops there to safeguard us against the Persians. Magnentius has timed his attack very well. The worst of it is, I shall have to lead the army against him myself. I can't afford to let anybody else make a secret treaty with Magnentius while I'm beating the Persians. But to whom can I give the command on the Persian frontier? That is my main problem. Eusebius suggested his cousin Barbatio, of course."

"I don't like Barbatio," said Eusebia. "He's got such a rude laugh and he doesn't look people straight in the face."

"Barbatio is out of the question," declared Constantius. "I told Eusebius so, immediately, and I'm glad that you confirm my opinion. Barbatio is out. But who is in? Look, my dear, in a few days Magnentius' envoys will be here. Whatever I tell them, there will be war sooner or later with Magnentius."

"Yes, I'm afraid you're right," said Eusebia sadly.

"There must be," Constantius went on, "because even if I was so weak as to give in to all his demands and even if I recognised him as Emperor of the West, which I can't—"

"Of course not."

"—even then Magnentius would not be pacified. He's in the wrong. The more we give in, the more he will persist in his wrong course. His demands will become bigger and bigger. And there will always be one thought in his mind: 'Constantius is really the Emperor—I, Magnentius, am only a usurper . . . as long as Constantius lives—'"

"No," cried Eusebia, "no, don't talk like that, I can't bear it."

Constantius smiled. He was pleased. He liked to feel that someone cared about his safety and Eusebia's outcry was genuine.

"I'm not dead yet, my love," he said, "and I shall take very good care that nothing hastens the natural process of gradual putrefaction, as the Cynic Somarchos described life."

"I loathe Cynics."

"I'm not particularly fond of them myself. All philosophy

reeks of paganism. Eusebius told me a few weeks ago that there are real hotbeds of paganism in Ephesus and Athens. I suppose one day I may have to do something about it. To go back to our problem—won't you sit down, my love? Your health—”

“My Imperial husband is very kind,” murmured Eusebia. She had suffered agonies from standing all this time, whilst the Emperor was pacing up and down. She could have sat down, though etiquette really demanded that the Emperor first give her permission. But she wanted *him* to think of it; she wanted *him* to be worried, just a little, about her health.

To sit down now was a delicious relief.

“The problem is this,” said Constantius firmly. “Sooner or later I must fight Magnentius, it may take a year, or two years—or even three. He can draw on Gaul and Spain, and they are the richest provinces of the Empire. Having to fight him means that I cannot possibly concentrate on the East. That again means that I must know the East is under safe control. Who is going to control it? It can't be a politician who isn't a soldier, or the Persians will jump over the frontier. It can't be a soldier who isn't a politician, or he will not be able to prevent political unrest. And it can't be a soldier who is a politician as well, because that would be too much of a temptation to imitate Magnentius' example. So what am I going to do?”

The Empress sat absolutely still. Only her eyes, soft, brown and cow-like, followed the nervous movements of her husband. But her mind, eager and upset, was beginning to work. She had not been able to follow all these politico-military explanations, but she knew instinctively that Constantius felt alone, deserted, that he was in dire need of a friend. But an Emperor had no friends, only courtiers. Now, when Cherubaal had seen her, three days ago—

She flushed. She wanted to say something. But already the Emperor was speaking again, and speaking her own thoughts.

“What am I to do? There is no one I can rely upon, no one. There is no tie, no tie to—”

“—to your family,” said Eusebia quickly. “Quite. That's what is wrong. Oh, I knew it. I knew it so well.”

He stopped in front of her.

“What did you know?”

With a great effort she managed to suppress a wild desire to burst into tears again. She even managed to smile.

“Constantius, my dear—how often have I prayed to God, and to His Sweet Son for a child. There was never an answer. And now I know I shall never have one—”

“Eusebia! You can't possibly know for certain—”

"I do know it, my dearest love. As certain as the stars are wandering across the sky, I know I shall never be able to give you what you need most—an heir."

"The stars—" the Emperor looked doubtful. "Did Cherubaal tell you that?"

"Yes, he did. He was very kind and understanding, but he left me in no doubt about it."

"Cherubaal," said the Emperor with a slightly forced smile. "Our star-monkey." But the old joke did not sound very convincing. Many times the queer old man had given him evasive answers or ambiguous ones, like the Delphic oracle of old. But he had never lied to him. Bishop Arcadius, the Imperial pater confessor, had thundered against any belief in the stars—but had not the Three Holy Astrologers seen the star of the King of Kings? And was it not written in the Bible that "the stars in their courses fought against Sisera"? One could not dismiss the matter as easily as all that.

Then he saw that Eusebia had bent her head to hide her face, and he laid a gentle hand on her shoulder and said: -

"Don't be upset, my love. You and I, we have known it for a long time; what Cherubaal said was only a confirmation. In the present situation it wouldn't help me very much even if you were expecting a child now, not even if it were born now and born a son—not even if you had given me a son ten years ago. I need a *man*, I can rely on, and I need him *now*."

Eusebia looked up, and there was something strangely solemn in her soft voice as she said: "Constantius, I feel that it is the will of God that we should not be blessed with children of our own, and I think I know why not. When your blessed father died—"

"Don't," interrupted Constantius brusquely. "Please, don't."

He turned aside and stared with unseeing eyes into the distance.

Spectres of the past arose, glaring and bloody. That day when his father had died, and Eusebius had spoken so glibly of the political necessities, of security, of the imperious demands of Fate—the document he had shown him, the testament of the great dead; of course he knew that it was false—only the signature was genuine, the rest had been faked, and very cleverly at that. Eusebius was clever, and he was sincere enough in his loyalty. He had been convinced that he was doing the right thing. But when he had had leaflets made and distributed them among the soldiers, he had known beforehand in what way they would react, that they would seethe with indignation and anger, that they would demand the heads of the culprits who had poisoned the great Em-

peror. Had not Constantine asked to be avenged in that lying document?

"I, was very young then," said the Emperor. It was as though he were defending himself against his own thoughts rather than talking to Eusebia. "I'd had so little experience. Had I known—"

But hadn't he known? Even then?

Was it not just what he had expected; that the soldiers would force his hand to strike against his own family? More than once he had felt something of what Eusebia felt now; but he had never quite admitted it to himself, and Eusebia had never spoken of it until now. He felt furious and fearful at the same time.

He would have liked to turn against her, even to hit her, but he realised that he was only trying to strike back at his own conscience. Eusebia was his conscience.

What if she was right? If it really was the hand of God that was upon him, that no life was granted to his seed for the life that he had taken?

"What can I do?" he murmured.

Eusebia rose heavily, moved up to him and laid her head on his shoulder. "Love," she said wearily, "love alone can atone for it—"

And, after a silence, filled with whispering voices, she added:

"Cherubaa! said another thing—I can't understand it at all—and even he couldn't explain it to me—"

"That's not very surprising," declared the Emperor, glad of anything that would break the tension of the moment. "He's often as dark as the Sibylline Books. What is it?"

"He said, very solemnly, that according to his reading of the stars, the house of Constantine the Great would prevail *through its own strength*—"

A sudden flash crossed the Emperor's face.

"He said that, did he? By God, he may be right!"

Eusebia looked at him in surprise.

"What do you mean? How could that be?"

But the Emperor was already pacing up and down the room again with renewed vigour.

"'Prevail through its own strength,'" he repeated with a low chuckle. "Good old Cherubaa!, and he doesn't know, he can't possibly know—"

"Constantius," cried Eusebia, "do explain to me—what is this riddle?"

The Emperor laughed.

"I shall send Cherubaa! a thousand pieces of gold," he said. "No—I'll make it three thousand. He's worth his weight

in gold, our old star-monkey. 'Through its own strength'—Eusebia! Cherubaal doesn't know—and you don't know—no one, except Eusebius and me, and the other Eusebius, the late Bishop of Nicomedia, and a few, a very few others, knows that on that fatal night, for which may God forgive me—if I bear any of its responsibility—not all the members of the family were killed. Two are still alive, though they were not brought up and trained in high office. They do not know of each other. Look, Eusebia, not a word about this to anyone, least of all to the First Chamberlain. I'm going to act entirely on my own. But I think—I really think—I've found the solution to the problem. . . ."

CHAPTER XIII

The tavern was buzzing. Three score people can make plenty of noise when they've had plenty of cheap wine. True, the wine wasn't as cheap as it had been before the damned Persian war, what with taxes being increased and increased again, but one could still get one's fill and that was what mattered. And then, war brought money in, as well as taking it away—not for everyone, of course, but for everyone who was clever enough—and there were certainly plenty of clever people in Byzantium.

"Symmachus has been making millions, I hear."

"He would, the ogre; may his soul rot in hell. He always was a crook and after other people's hard-earned cash."

"Some people always will be spendthrifts, they'll cry for help and borrow money from some good-natured fellow; then, when he wants it back, they'll howl that he's a crook."

"Who are you to talk like that?"

"What's Symmachus paying you?"

"Shut up, you're drunk, you old bottlenose."

"Take it easy now, my friends," said the fat tavern keeper.

"Anyway, it's stale news you're telling. There'll always be people who make money out of other people's trouble. Take lawyers—take physicians—"

"I won't take either! They only bleed one white, one way or the other."

"I'm a lawyer myself, you rogue!"

"I thought so from your twisting arguments."

"I'm not twisting any arguments. But we can't have you condemning a man who's not here to defend himself—justice first."

"If justice came first, Symmachus and everyone like him would have been hung ages ago."

"Oh, you make me tired."

"How comes it," asked a suave voice from a corner of the room, "That this man Symmachus can lend money on interest? Is he not a Christian?"

Heads turned towards the speaker, a squat, fat eunuch, simply dressed, sitting with a pale young man of eighteen or nineteen.

"A Christian? Symmachus? Why, he's far worse than any accursed pagan—he's a heretic."

"Now, that's absolutely untrue," cried the lawyer angrily. "He's an Arian Christian, like you and me."

"What? What's that? Are you calling me an Arian, you miserable heretic? Didn't the Holy Synod, fifty bishops and all, condemn the heresy of Arius? How dare you flaunt your gross abominations in front of so many worthy citizens."

"The swine!"

"The dog!"

"Take it easy now, my friends," said the tavern keeper.

"Who are you, to condemn my belief?" screamed the lawyer. "You're probably a dirty pagan!"

"Now, that's the limit—"

"Or one of those Novatians, who sacrifice little children—"

"Who says that Novatians sacrifice children? I'll bash your teeth in, you spawn of Satan!"

"Now listen, all of you. Let's discuss this like friends. Surely Christ did not want us—"

"You shut up. What d'you know about Christ? I know *you*—I've seen you sneaking into a meeting of God-abandoned Sabellians, and I always suspected—"

"Aren't the Sabellians the only true believers in Christ, you rotting carcass?"

"What *is* all this about?"

"The Sabellians stink in the noses of all good Christians! Even hell fire is too good for those Patripassians!"

"Down with all heretics!"

"Listen to that Manichæan! He's the biggest heretic of all and he dares to criticise his betters. Drown that demon-worshipping follower of Lucifer!"

"Take it easy, my friends, take it easy—"

"What *is* it all about?"

"It all started with that drunken son of a *ghoul* calling me an Arian!"

"What's wrong with being an Arian—why, the Emperor inclines that way himself, and he'll be completely converted soon."

"I suppose he told you that personally, you cheap twister?"

"He didn't—"

"Aha!"

"But his First Chamberlain did."

"Eusebius!"

"That old death's head—"

"That slave driver!"

"Not man and not woman!"

"He *would* be an Arian, of course."

"I tell you the Emperor *is* an Arian!"

"And I tell you, you are the son of a one-eyed whore!"

"Let go my beard!"

"Say that again about Manichæans being worshippers of Lucifer and I'll push your ugly face in!"

"Let—go—my—beard!"

"Take it easy—take it easy—*please!*"

"The bunch of idiots! Here they sit and quarrel among themselves while a week ago Athanasius landed in Alexandria!"

A sudden hush fell over the room. Then:

"Did you say—Athanasius?"

"I did. The Emperor's allowed him to come back. He's been specifically told he may return."

"No!"

"I tell you, yes. And what's more, he's Catholic Archbishop of Alexandria again, full powers and all."

That was too much. The tavern roared.

"Lucifer himself!"

"The arch-fiend!"

"I thought he was dead."

"No fear! That sort never dies."

"Not a word against Athanasius! He's a saint, a martyr—"

"You filthy Catholic! Take this for the glory of Christ and that for your own impudence!"

"Easy! Easy! Easy!"

"Don't hit the tavern keeper or we won't get any more wine!"

"Hit him! Hit him hard and we'll have all the wine he's got!"

"Sabellian whoremonger!"

"Manichæan louse!"

"Let—go—my—beard!"

The eunuch in the corner beckoned his young friend and they began a strategic withdrawal. It wasn't easy—the Manichæan had thrown the Sabellian down, sat on him and was pummelling his defenceless head. The Catholic had disappeared in what seemed to be a struggling mass of human

arms and legs. The tavern keeper had vanished behind a stack of heavy amphoras made of clay and the air was full of shrill screams, loud abuse, obscenities and dust.

They navigated cautiously round two or three fighting groups and just as they reached the door, someone threw a knife and there was one long screech from the other side of the room, and then silence.

"Quick, Julian—we can't afford to be found here by the police."

The air outside was balm to their tingling nerves.

"Here—round the corner. It's dark now, fortunately."

"Do you think someone was killed?"

"Possibly. It happens every day, in a hundred taverns and inns. How do you like your meek and mild Nazarenes?"

"You certainly don't seem to have overstated it, Mardonius."

"What you've just seen is typical of what's going on all over the Empire. It's quite true what that lawyer-fellow said: the Emperor is seriously considering Arianism."

"But if that's true—why did he let that man—I forget his name—go back to his bishopric of Alexandria?"

"The name you've forgotten is Athanasius—and you're not likely to forget it again. He's the most dangerous man of the lot, the most fanatical, the greatest enemy of the Empire and of his whole generation."

"Is he? But how?"

"He's a natural leader of men—and a fierce antagonist of all authority except his own— This street now, Julian—the other leads to the brothels and Alexander, Crispus and Xenarchus; pious Christians all of them, and the most zealous churchgoers. Remember the little man we met day before yesterday, in the silver market? Timon, the silversmith? He's Xenarchus' brother."

"But what about that man—Athanasius?"

"I can't give you his whole history in a few minutes. He's over sixty now, and has been Archbishop of Alexandria for almost a generation, even counting his exile. He's been in exile several times. Even the great Constantinus had to exile him once and so did Constantius who's now recalled him: the greatest mistake he could make if he wants his particular brand of Christianity to triumph. I wonder what persuaded him to do it? It may have been his brother Constans—the wretch; lives with his boy friends and pretends piety."

"Mardonius, this Empire is one big swamp."

"It is, Julian. I'm getting tired of repeating to you: I told you so. In any case: when Athanasius returned from exile he saw Constantius in Antioch. Constantius, modestly

enough, asked him to tolerate one—one!—church of the Arians in his diocese of Alexandria. He replied he would do so, if Constantius tolerated one Catholic church in all the other cities of the Empire. Conditions, Julian! As from one Emperor to another!"

"What insolence!"

"I agree, but there you have Athanasius just as he is. His return to Alexandria was like a triumphal march after a major victory. The highest officials carried him in an open litter through the streets—flowers were showered all over him. Crowds fought to kiss his hands, his feet, the hem of his cloak. When Constantius himself came to Alexandria, he had a cool reception to say the least of it. There were no flowers for *him*. . . ."

"It's amazing. I should like to see that man."

"No, Julian, never. Promise me to keep out of his way as long as you live."

"But surely—it would be most interesting—"

"It is not only dangerous—it's fatal. Go unarmed to meet the Hyrcanian tiger—attack a Persian fort single-handed; in either case you would have a better chance than against Athanasius. He is—like his name . . . immortal. When the whole breed of Nazarenes has died out and even centuries after the death of their creed, the name of Athanasius will be remembered."

"I've never heard you talk like this before."

"I have never talked to you about this man before. It is not the creed he represents; it's his personality. He would be just as great if he were a fire-worshipper instead of a Catholic."

"I agree with one man in the tavern," said Julian with a quick smile. "I mean the one who kept on asking what it was all about. Why do they call each other names and fight like that?"

"Because the creed of the mild shepherd is poisonous, Julian. After all, what is poison, really?—just one material that will not mix with another! There's no harm in deadly nightshade growing by the roadside—only when you try to eat it does it become poisonous to you. The Christian creed is poisonous because it does not agree with the mind of man—it distorts it, upsets it—poisons it. When the half-naked barbarians of the North attack you, 'Turn the other cheek,' says the Nazarene. When the government exhorts you to work for the good of the State 'Consider the lilies of the field . . . they toil not, neither do they spin,' says the Nazarene. When, like a good patriot, you are working to maintain the greatness of your nation 'all is vanity'—the only thing that matters is a spectre of a life—after death. So runs the impos-

sible doctrine of that misguided preacher, who had no idea of the world he was preaching to. What effect has it had? You find that the first Christians were already undermining the authority of the State—they were unwilling to serve in the army; ‘They that take the sword, shall perish with the sword’—you quoted that one to me yourself, two years ago. You find them opposing the authority of the Emperor; completely intolerant of all other beliefs; incapable of living peaceably with their neighbours. Emperor after Emperor had to persecute them—that is, he had to stop their undermining, anti-social activities, first by admonitions, then by edicts, finally by more drastic measures. They enjoyed it! For was not death the only thing they longed for? Life was only a period of temptation, a perpetual fight against their natural instincts, each of which they perverted into deadly sins. No wonder that most of the converts to this doctrine that ‘life is death—death is life’ were slaves, both by rank and inclination! It was a slave’s creed.”

He paused to regain his breath.

Julian remained silent. At first, when Mardonius used to attack Christianity, he had contradicted him and had fought him as best he could. But the more he saw of the Christian world, the more difficult it became to defend it. Besides, whenever he had doubted one of Mardonius’ more sensational accusations, the next week, and sometimes even the next day, brought some experience proving his teacher right.

And all the time the poetic world of old, with its heroes and gods and goddesses, with its immortal deeds and—most of all—with its immortal beauty, held him with its magic.

And, as though he guessed his young friend’s thoughts, Mardonius resumed: “They were the bitter enemies of beauty, of course—how could it be otherwise? Only in drab austerity could they concentrate on their ideal: a poor, simple man, crucified for disappointing the Jews in their hope of a Messiah. Beauty was anathema to them. And then an inconceivable thing happened: an Emperor, gone weak and effete, adopts this creed as the religion of the State! The paradox of it—the State adopting a religion which by its very nature was an enemy of the State! The consequences, of course, were disastrous. The two materials did not mix—they poisoned each other; the Christians were poisoned because they became powerful—powerful on earth. They became rich and opulent, swollen with the goods of the earth they pretended to despise. Look at those bishops in silk and gold, look at their churches full of precious vessels, paid for by poor fools who imagine that they can bribe their God with some

of His own possessions. Their intolerance now reverted to self-destruction. They began to fight each other over the most ridiculous and irrelevant subtleties in their own doctrine—none of which they had the slightest chance of proving. Their only proof was that they could scream louder than your heretic, or be quicker with their fists. You have seen some of that this evening. And the State? It too was poisoned, naturally. The man on the throne, the men in the high offices became emasculated, soft, inert. They relinquished all statesmanship, they lost all their battles. The only men who occasionally succeed in stemming the flood are barbarians in Roman pay: like Nevitta here or like Magnentius in Gaul. They, too, are Christians, of course—that is, they have suffered baptism, but despise the sanctifying water they remained what they were: rough, primitive barbarians, with a good instinct for warfare. Both the Teutons around the banks of the Rhine and the Sarmatians, north and east of the Danube, have that instinct. It will certainly be a show when these two turn against each other! But where is the wise Tiberius with his divide and rule, to bring that about and to let diamond cut diamond? Instead we have adopted that dangerous policy of bröding them into our service. They are quick to learn—very soon they may use their knowledge against us. In fact, it may happen any day now—”

Julian shook his head.

“That is the one thing I cannot believe. Barbarians ruling Rome—it’s impossible. You are taking too pessimistic a view.”

“Am I? We shall see.”

For a while they walked on in silence. He argues his case with me now, thought Mardonius. He’s beginning to grow up. It’s just as well that I can supervise every stage of his development. Three months, even three weeks by himself—and I might lose control. He’s much more of a Constantian than the Emperor.

At the next corner, in the deep shadows of an archway, a man was waiting with three horses. It was Hiempsal, now bowing submissively.

“Anybody asked you any questions?”

“No, Master.”

“Good.”

They mounted and rode off, towards the Southern Gate, with the Nubian keeping at a respectful distance.

“Very reliable,” murmured Julian.

“Who? Hiempsal? Of course he is. He used to be a bit of a nuisance with women before I had him gelded—the day after we arrived from Macellum.”

The thought stirred Julian. So that is why the giant Heimpsal's body has become gross and unwieldy, the tone of his voice plaintive and soft. What a strange thing for Mardonius of all people to do to any living creature.

"We must not overestimate the reactions and reflexes of slaves," said Mardonius, as though guessing his thoughts. "They are very little higher, if at all, than those of any other animal. It is a most dangerous thing trying to have any kind of human relationship with them—far from raising their level, one only lowers one's own. Here is another danger in the Christian doctrine: the idea that you and a slave are equal in the sight of God is sheer madness. If they believed it, sooner or later they would revolt—and it would be the most ghastly revolution the world has ever seen. Fortunately their senses are dull and their powers of perception incapable of conceiving such an idea. Give them enough to eat and drink, treat them reasonably well and they'll be perfectly happy. Hey, Hiempsal!"

"Yes, Master."

"A double ration for you to-morrow—you can tell the Majordomo I said so."

The giant's flabby face beamed. "Thank'ee, Master."

They rode on in silence. He used to be a bit of a nuisance with women, thought Julian. That strange urge of man, stark, animal, demanding, crude. Early he had learnt how to fight it. They all did, in the monastery, and there was never any fuss about it. It was now almost four years ago since Abbot Thomas had explained to him how plants multiplied and fish and animals and man: "It's the animal part of our nature—we are rational animals. This urge belongs to the lower part of our natures. There is nothing sinful about it—it exists. But it exists for one purpose only: the propagation of man."

Then he had spoken of man's aim to acquire spiritual height.

"In order to do that, we must overcome the lower part of our nature. There must be no desire, no urge in us, to make us deviate from our course. We must learn to renounce the flesh. It is not always easy, at any stage of life. The child is greedy, the young man is greedy and the old man is greedy too; each of them in their own way. But the nearer we come to the spirit, the further removed we shall be from the flesh. That is why monks must learn to despise the demands of the flesh, in order to master completely the lower part of their nature. . . ."

Strange, how well he remembered those words. "He used to be a bit of a nuisance with women before I had him gelded." It certainly did not look as though Hiempsal

had gained spiritual height. Could Mardonius be right—as he had so often been in the past—and were slaves something between animal and man? Or was it just convenient to think of them that way?

What about the poets? Both the classics, like Homer and Hesiod, and especially the more modern ones, seemed to have a very different conception. They spoke of the beauty of woman that fired man's heart and made him set out to conquer. They spoke of snowy arms and shoulders, of dainty feet and smiles that bewitched. Poets worshipped woman, and were not poets men of higher intellect and consciousness than ordinary mortals?

During the ten years in the monastery he had never set eyes on a woman. In the two years he had spent with Mardonius—his nephew to all those who asked curious questions—well, yes, there were female slaves, playing musical instruments when a party of guests was assembled—but they were kept apart under the eye of sour-faced old Telesippe. There had been no women guests at all.

I haven't had enough personal experience, he thought gravely. I cannot judge these things yet.

There had been other experiences, though. They had been to visit a number of places—first in Nicomedia, then in Byzantium.

"You must learn the life of the cities and towns, Julian."

And a perturbing, noisy, strange and often very ugly experience it was. They usually went out in some disguise or other—they had been wool buyers and carpet merchants, and even beggars once, on the steps of the main church of Byzantium.

"Study the faces of the pious, Julian; look at the expression in their eyes; notice how many of them are giving alms because the poor are needy or because they wish to honour their God in His most wretched image—and again how many are giving in order to be seen giving or—far more frequent—in order to be able to feel complacent about their own luxurious lives, to bribe their own consciences."

They had seen battles between Arians and Catholics, Cainites and Novatians, Donatists and Sabellians, Manichæans and Ebionites, and many others—all of whom were firmly convinced that theirs was the only way to heaven and that it was their duty to persuade their neighbours of their certainty by clubbing them, burning them or stabbing them where it hurt most.

When in Byzantium, they usually stayed at one of the larger inns, but lately they had taken up their quarters in the

house of an old friend of Mardonius, Cherubaal. He was a queer little man, with his monkey-face and shrewd black eyes; he seemed well-off, nor was this the only house he owned. In fact he rarely stayed there himself, but lived as a rule, in his luxurious villa, a stone's throw from the Palace—in order to be near when he was suddenly called for, Mardonius had explained.

Cherubaal was the Emperor's astrologer. Strange how that old superstition had weathered the times. Even Mardonius himself took some interest in the "message of the stars"—or was it simply because he wanted to please his host? Most likely Cherubaal would not be his host, had it not been that Mardonius believed in his stars.

What if it was not superstition after all? If there really was some relationship between the heavenly bodies and the fate of man?

The Emperors of Babylonia and Assyria had believed it, and the Grand Kings of Persia and Media—the Pharaohs of all dynasties had had their astrologers—and had not Cæsar been warned by an astrologer, just before he went up to the Capitol to his doom? Had not Thrasyllus prophesied to Tiberius that he would—and even when he would—ascend the throne; at a time when his master was an exile on Rhodes, with as little hope of ever becoming Emperor as as I have, thought Julian and he smiled. Or, to be quite exact, with *almost* as little hope as I have, for I have none at all—

But here was Cherubaal's house—with its walled garden. There was a statue of the sphinx in it, a fairly big one, big enough anyway to tower above the wall. In fact the head of the sphinx could be seen a long time before one arrived at the house.

There were plenty of little sphinxes in the house itself, too; a double row of them right and left of the staircase and a big bronze one in the hall.

Cherubaal loved sphinxes and collected them with the same gusto with which he stuffed himself with flamingo tongues—an exceedingly expensive taste in either case—with Egypt so far away.

They dismounted in the garden and a slave led their horses away.

"Well, that was another experience," said Mardonius pleasantly. "You're learning something new every day, aren't you, Julian?"

"Yes, Sir, I am—thanks to you."

"And it's not always pleasant, I suppose."

"White is white only in contrast to black," said Julian.

The eunuch made a wry face. "That sounds like Athenian rhetoric to me—"

"As a matter of fact, it is, Sir—from one of the orations of Libanius."

"That old washerwoman—"

"Oh, Sir, the foremost rhetorician of our time, his phraseology—"

"—his style is insufferably stilted and his thoughts are made to fit the rhythm at the expense of their meaning—if any."

"Aren't you a little hard on a very great man, Sir?"

"It is what a man says that matters, and not so much how he says it."

"Kamil—Kamil—"

"Wasn't that our host's voice?" asked Julian. He was glad of a chance to change the subject and just a little hurt by Mardonius' contempt for Libanius' literary genius, worshipped by the intelligentsia of the Empire. It was bad enough, he thought, that he had never seen any of his writings in Mardonius' house in Nicomedia. He had read here in Byzantium, some of his lectures to his students in Athens—they had been sent to Cherubaal's house by the Imperial librarian, together with a number of new works, most of which had been religious, rather dull and incredibly unctuous.

"It was Cherubaal's voice—you're right," answered Mardonius, throwing his cloak to Hiempsal who caught it deftly, as usual.

"Kamil? Where are you?"

Suddenly the little Chaldean peeped through the huge black curtain. "Oh—so you've returned! Thanks be to all—the good powers. Did Kamil find you then? I had half a dozen men out, looking for you everywhere, in the thermes, in the lecture halls, in the palæstra. Mardonius—I have news for you—"

"Excuse me, Julian," said the eunuch, who had seen the expression in Cherubaal's eyes. The young man bowed, first to him, then to the astrologer and bounded up the stairs to his room.

"What is it, Cherubaal?"

The little astrologer took a deep breath. "It's worked," he whispered. "A letter from the Empress—to whom God and so on—arrived an hour ago, and a present from the Emperor, quite incredible. But read the letter."

He handed it over, a large parchment with the Empress' hand-seal.

Mardonius unrolled it and read:

Eusebia Imperatrix Augusta to Cherubaal

Greetings:

The advice, so kindly given to us last week, proved to be true as usual. Great things have happened, and greater ones are about to happen. We should like to hear more of your reading of the stars and we command you to our presence without delay.

The two men looked at each other.

"What does this mean, Cherubaal?"

"All I know is that certain envoys have arrived from the West. An audience took place at the Palace to-day. There is an air of mystery about it—but it seems to have something to do with a mutiny in Gaul or Spain."

"Gaul? Spain? That's Constans' domain, surely. Are they Constans' envoys, then?"

"They may be—I don't know. But what I can't understand is what the great things that have happened and the greater things that are about to happen, have to do with the advice I gave the Empress; and here is a line from the Emperor himself," continued Cherubaal, handing his friend another letter, written in the Imperial purple ink. "It came with the present."

Constantius Imperator Augustus to Cherubaal

Here is gold for wisdom. The Constantian Empire *will* prevail through its own strength. C

Mardonius' thoughts were racing.

"What is the situation, Cherubaal? Has anything happened lately—anything out of the ordinary, I mean—as far as the succession is concerned—no, how could it be? But if there is sedition in the West, why—?"

The little astrologer was shifting restlessly from one leg to the other. "I must go, Mardonius," he murmured. "Can't let the Empress wait too long. I'm late already. Come 'without delay,' she said, and I've been delaying ever since, so as to let you know."

"Very well—" Mardonius had regained control of his thoughts. "It's impossible to see clearly without more information. Go, Cherubaal—this may be very important for us; and it may not be. Go, and find out. We shall stay here, Julian and I. Send me a line as soon as you have news."

"I will—"

The eunuch grinned. "In any case you have profited nicely from the advice I gave you and that you gave the Empress, haven't you?"

"May Jupiter bless us," murmured Cherubaal, immediately touching the wood of the nearest chair. For all wood was sacred to Jupiter and no boastful statement should be made without acknowledging by this gesture that the supreme god's prerogative was not only to give but also to take away. It was a very old custom, five or six centuries old at least and possibly much older. Now Cherubaal, as an astrologer, knew perfectly well that Jupiter exercised his forces through the planet named after him, and that such forces were calculable; it was, in fact, Cherubaal's business to calculate them. To touch Jupiter's sacred wood could neither diminish nor increase the forces of the planet; but nothing is more difficult to kill than an old superstition.

Still—he was a little ashamed of himself.

"Kamil! By Astaroth's calves, I'll have the fellow roasted alive when he comes back—Ho, somebody! My cloak—my litter—I'm going—"

Half a dozen slaves appeared and in no time there was pandemonium in the hall, with Cherubaal shrilling orders which no one seemed able to carry out.

"I want the scrolls in the first cupboard on the left—Oh, Styx! I forgot—the cupboard's in the other house—Oh, hell and damnation—"

Then Kamil, the dwarf, waddled in to be met with a tirade of abuse that seemed to be endless. But at last even Cherubaal had to pause for breath, and Kamil, totally unabashed, said: "The litter is here, Master, the scrolls you want are in it, so is your rug, so is your staff, the one with the ivory knob."

"You—you—well done, you catastrophe on legs. I'm off, Mardonius; better hold yourself in readiness. I can't help feeling that you may get very sudden news to-night."

Two hours later Cherubaal was back. The litter bearers had almost broken down, he had hurried them so much. He found Mardonius alone in the library, immersed in Ptolemy's *Tetrabiblos*.

"Victory," he crowed. "By Astaroth's lips, you are a great man, Mardonius—and so am I! Oh, it's incredible—quite incredible."

The eunuch rose. "What's happened? Try to be coherent, my friend, I entreat you."

"You've done it, friend. I've done—We've done it! Just listen to this: first of all, Constans has been murdered. By Magnentius—Magnentius has assumed the purple."

"So that's it—" Mardonius closed his eyes, better to concentrate. "What about his envoys? Promises to keep the peace, if only he is recognised, I suppose."

"Yes—just that."

"And the Emperor?"

"The Emperor—to whom God and so on—has said that he is going to think it over—but he'd thought it over a long time before. He knew all about it, days in advance."

"The Persian frontier," said Mardonius abruptly. "He can't leave it unguarded, if he wants to fight Magnentius, and he's got to fight him, now or in the near future."

Cherubaal looked at him with unconcealed admiration. "Right again; Odysseus had nothing on you. And that is exactly where you come in—or I come in. The Empress said she told the Emperor of what I'd said to her you know; that the Constantian rule would prevail—he fairly jumped at that, it seems, and it gave him an idea. He alluded to the fact that on the night after the great Constantine died not every member of his family was killed—"

"When was that?" shouted Mardonius. "Quickly, Cherubaal—when did he tell Eusebia that?"

"Three days ago—"

"Three days ago—" Mardonius' face was shining triumphantly. Three days ago—that meant the Imperial messengers, dispatched to Macellum, could only just have arrived—and they would need at least three days, if not more, for the return journey. There was plenty of time. . . .

"Excellent, Cherubaal. Now, this is the next step. I want an audience with the Empress—as quickly as possible. Not later than the day after to-morrow. A private audience, but you can't arrange that—the less people connect us the better—for obvious reasons. Who is the right man?"

"Well, the least suitable would be the First Chamberlain, so we had better choose one of his enemies. Senator Attilianus for instance, or better still one of the bishops—"

Mardonius grinned broadly.

"Beautiful," he said. "The Empress' pater confessor—Bishop Arcadius. Nothing could suit me better. But can it be arranged?"

Cherubaal pondered a little while over that.

"Easy," he said. "We have a number of clients in common; the Lady Volumnia, for instance. First she comes to me to find out when she's going to have a new love affair—and I tell her. She has it. When she's tired of it, she goes to Bishop Arcadius and confesses it, and then she comes to me again."

"What a Cynic you are, Cherubaal," laughed the eunuch.

The little Chaldean shrugged his shoulders. "Many people are too cowardly for either vice or virtue," he said, "In any case, Lady Volumnia will get you your audience, and what is more, she'll get it for you in such a way that the

First Chamberlain knows nothing about it before it is too late. How's that?"

"You're a great man, Cherubaal," said Mardonius.

CHAPTER XIV

When Julian heard the heavy steps approaching, he hastily hid the scroll with Libanius' latest speech under the pillow of the couch.

Mardonius entered and so grave was his face that the young man jumped up. "You have news, Sir?"

"I have, Julian, my son."

The young man paled. "Of—of my mother? She—is she dead?"

Mardonius shook his head. "There is still no news of your mother, Julian; but frankly, I fear there never will be. My agents have been searching far and wide for her, but they have found no trace. You are the only one left, out of the whole family. Don't look so sad, son; didn't you know it all the time in your heart?"

"I—I'm not sure. Sometimes I felt it couldn't be."

"There is nothing more dangerous for a man than to make his wishes the father of his thoughts," said the eunuch gently. "My news has nothing to do with your mother, but in a way it's family news all the same. The Emperor is calling for you, Julian."

"The Emperor?"

"No, do not frown, my son; keep your temper even and controlled, as befits the philosopher."

"What does the Emperor want with me?" asked Julian hoarsely.

"The Emperor wants your help," said Mardonius. "Are you ready to give it to him?"

"The man who killed my father," gasped Julian. "The man who caused my mother's death, for all we know a murderer eleven times over—"

The eunuch smiled. "I suppose, as a Christian, you should forgive him—" he said lightly.

Julian trembled. He was searching in vain for words. Never before in his life had he felt so angry. A thousand voices screamed and hissed and thundered inside him.

"Maybe, you could have forgiven him two years ago," said Mardonius with cold mockery. "They had fastened that

sort of teaching on to your soul very strongly, in your prison at Macellum. It's a wonderful method of subduing others by filling them with a spirit of abject humility and servitude; once it is achieved, one can rule without fear, and laugh at every-forgiving fools. Do you *want* to forgive the Emperor, Julian?"

"I can't," stammered Julian, "I simply can't."

"Very well then, don't—" ventured the eunuch. "I'm not asking you to forgive him, but I am asking you to help him—"

Julian flared up: "Never! Why, I'd rather—"

That smile again; he almost hated it, that ironic, half-hidden smile of superior wisdom—or was it superior cunning?

"But listen to me, my Julian," the smile had vanished now, "you are no ordinary man who blurts out his anger or joy whenever he feels it. You are of the Imperial blood—your ancestors have ruled Rome and the earth. The Emperor killed your family—but now he calls for you because the Empire is in danger—and for no other reason."

"The Empire?"

"Do you remember the discussion we had when we left the tavern with its seething swarms of Christian sectarians? Do you remember my mentioning that a barbarian might set out to rule Rome? You denied that such a thing could possibly happen. You said that I saw things too pessimistically. Well—it has happened. General Magnentius, a man of pure barbarian stock, has proclaimed himself Emperor of the West. There will be war very soon—civil war."

Julian listened, wide-eyed.

"This is an hour of emergency," went on Mardonius. "The Emperor cannot be everywhere at once—he needs men who can be relied upon not to sell the Empire under the counter—and so he has remembered you!"

"But of what use could I be to him? He must think I'm a monk—"

"It wouldn't be the first time—and it certainly won't be the last either—that a man is torn away from his environment when the time is ripe. You're only nineteen—he can hardly give you command of an army or regular high office. Nor does he need to. He's got many generals and even more officials. No, what he wants is someone to act as his representative—as the symbol of the Empire."

"A figurehead, you mean," jeered Julian.

"Certainly, Julian—a figurehead. Such is, such certainly must be his intention. There is a strange thing about figureheads. They remain what they are as long as they wish to do so—"

A sudden gleam in the young man's eyes answered him. "We are beginning to understand each other, aren't we, Julian?"

"Yes, Mardonius," Julian chuckled. "I wonder—"

"About what?"

"About how he is going to explain it all to me. It seems to me that he'll have to do a lot of explaining."

The eunuch laughed outright. "An Emperor never has much difficulty in doing that, Julian. In fact the one who will have to do the explaining is a man called Mardonius. Unless I'm very much mistaken, Imperial messengers are on their way to Macellum now—maybe at this very moment Deacon Perditus will shrug his wrestler's shoulders and say: 'Surely you know that the Emperor called Brother Julian away two years ago—through his Third Chamberlain, a man by the name of Boretius. He and Brother Julian went to Trapezus.'"

"That's true. . . . How are you going to get out of that one?"

"Leave it to me. This does not come entirely as a surprise, you know. I hoped for it—and when I hope for something, I always work for it, too. I've found that a very helpful principal where the fulfilment of hopes is concerned. Now, put on your best tunic and cloak, Julian, my son—we are going to Court."

"What—immediately?"

"Yes. The Empress Eusebia, to whom may God grant life for just as long as she'll be useful to us, expects Mardonius and a certain young man, described to her as a relative, in an hour's time. The Empress is a good-natured woman—you'll like her; and what's more important, she'll like you. Leave all the explaining to me. If everything goes well, by tonight you will have climbed the first steps of the ladder; they're usually the most difficult ones. The higher you get, the easier it will be. The gods be with you, Julian."

"By the way, Mardonius—"

"Yes."

"How did the Empress find out about my being here?"

"She didn't. I asked for the audience—or rather, Bishop Arcadius did."

"Who did you say?"

"Bishop Arcadius," repeated the eunuch with ill-concealed glee. "The Empress' pater confessor."

Julian broke into a laugh. It sounded just a little too shrill and uneasy to be quite genuine.

The very air of Byzantium was electric. The summer heat was sultry and the first thunderclouds were gathering steadily in the east, the vanguard of a vast army.

Lucilianus, Chief of Police of the Metropolitan Area, was working overtime and so were thousands of people employed by him, officially and otherwise. He had a great many things to cope with, and an irate First Chamberlain might come down on him at any moment. Not that it was the First Chamberlain's business; it was, if anyone's, that of the Master of Offices. But old Parmenio took things easily and Eusebius was the uncrowned Emperor.

"Anyone can have my post," spluttered the Chief of Police, when the third messenger arrived with an urgent note from the First Chamberlain. He cut the strings of the seal, opened the scroll, turned rather pale and began to bellow orders to a dozen harassed officers.

Then he took Captain Glabrio aside—the best man he had.

"There's work for you to do. When the four envoys received in audience to-day are dismissed from the Presence, you will detain them all, except Marcellinus; that's the tall fellow with the hooked nose who looks as though he had a bellyache—matter of fact, he has—he's going to be allowed to leave with his slaves and luggage. The other three are to be taken to the Old Prison."

"Prison, Sir? I thought they were ambassadors, or something."

"So they are," said Lucilianus. "But they're not the ambassadors of a recognised government. They're the envoys of a usurper."

Police Captain Glabrio grinned. "I see, Sir. That means civil war, of course."

"It doesn't mean a comedy, if that's what you thought," growled Lucilianus. "Take a dozen picked men—that'll be sufficient. The arrest itself must be made by the Domestics, of course. It's within the precincts of the Palace, and you know what Bloody Nevitta is like when he thinks someone is infringing on his rights. His father ran about naked—his mother crawled on all fours—but he's *Præfect* of the Domestics. Jesus Christ, what's the Empire coming to, I'd like to know? Now get busy."

Glabrio saluted stiffly and clanked out of the room.

Lucilianus turned back to the more ordinary matters in hand.

"Are the three hundred men in plain clothes among the crowd in front of the Palace? Have they got their instructions

as to what to listen for and what to shout against? Good. I want to check up on the traffic across the Sirmian bridge throughout the night. Where has Trebonian posted his men? I want it reported immediately when Augusta Constantina arrives. Come on now, wake up, all of you, plenty of time for you to sleep when the show is over."

At that very moment the Augusta Constantina, sister of the Emperor, arrived at the Palace, in a huge State coach drawn by four chestnuts. She threw the reins to Epaphroditus, the freedman who had accompanied her everywhere lately, was saluted by the Guards as befitted her rank and rushed upstairs, a slim woman of forty-two, whose features would have been beautiful in a straight-lined, Greek way, had they been less hard and imperious.

She refused to be escorted to the suite of rooms which had been made ready for her, and sailed straight towards the Emperor's suite, with several chamberlains and two elderly ladies-in-waiting pursuing her half-heartedly.

When the Augusta Constantina was in a temper, it was far better to keep out of range.

Even Constantius, for the sake of peace, had to grant her requests, including the unprecedented honour of the title "Augusta" for the sister, which by custom belonged only to the wife of the Emperor.

It was not until she reached the very doors of the Small Audience Room that she met really stiff opposition.

"State audience, no one is allowed to enter," said General Nevitta, Præfect of the Domestics, from his full height of six-foot-five. The slender woman in front of him fidgeted with the whip she carried.

"You seemed to have forgotten who I am," she said ominously.

The giant German opened his blue eyes as wide as the lids permitted.

"You seem to be the Divine Augusta Constantina," he ventured. "But even if you were God the Father or Almighty Wodan himself, I couldn't let you in now."

The angry Princess laughed. "I suppose one can't expect anything else from a Frankish buffalo," she said and, whizzing round, sped off in the direction of the Empress' suite.

Eusebia had received Mardonius and the "relative" in her own audience room. She was at her most charming.

"How kind of the Most Venerable Bishop Arcadius to let us make your acquaintance, Mardonius. You are recommended to us as a man who has travelled far and seen many

things, and we are sure to profit greatly from your acquaintance."

"Your Majesty overwhelms me," said the eunuch, repeating his bow of presentation.

"And this young man—is your relative, I suppose?" said the Empress, giving Julian a gracious nod.

"Heaven forbid that I should lay claim to such height," responded Mardonius quickly. "Flavius Claudius Julianus is the cousin of His Majesty the Emperor—"

Eusebia went as white as a sheet.

Two of her ladies made an instinctive movement towards her. But she regained control of herself immediately.

"Julianus," she murmured. "Not—a son of Julius Constantius—?"

"Just that, Your Majesty," replied Mardonius. He was trying hard to estimate the effects of his words. He could not quite make her out; experienced as he was in reading the minds of men, there was something in the attitude of the Empress that remained incomprehensible to him; there was an element of consternation, as though the Empress were at a loss to understand something.

And then Eusebia did something utterly unceremonial—it was to be criticised and discussed for weeks and months at Court. She opened her arms and embraced the young man.

"I'm so glad, Julian," she said. "Oh, I am so glad. God bless you, my dear boy."

Julian, shaken, though he did not understand, saw there were tears in her smiling eyes.

"This truly is a wonderful day," said Eusebia. "You know, of course, what is going on in the Emperor's Audience Room. It should be over any minute now, and then we shall all be together. I'm so sorry I didn't understand immediately, but I was quite unprepared—"

At that moment Thais rushed in to announce the Augusta Constantina.

The Princess followed almost on her heels. The ceremonial kiss between her and the Empress was cold and rather casual.

"By all the saints and devils, my sister, what is all this about?" asked Constantina, her anger entirely unabated. "I am rushed here in the most impossible haste and I simply couldn't make sense out of my brother's letter. He wants me to marry . . . oh, I see, you're having an audience. Can't you send these people away?"

She glared at the little group. "Who are they?—that young one looks like old Julius Constantius. Don't tell me you're Gallus. You can't be, you're too young, aren't you? Who is he, Eusebia?"

"It is your cousin Julian, Constantina," said Eusebia acidly. "And I assure you I knew nothing about your return to Byzantium—which you seem to resent. As for Gallus—he's with—"

"His Majesty the Divine Emperor," announced Thais.

The double doors opened wide and a glittering phalanx of men approached, all in full ceremonial dress.

The Emperor was preceded by four nobles, advancing very slowly.

Constantius, pale, but visibly pleased with himself, was leaning on the arm of a tall, broad-shouldered young man, in the field uniform of a legate. Immediately behind him were Eusebius and Parmenio, the two highest officials at Court, then Ursicinus and Nevitta and a great number of other officers and officials. Bishop Arcadius, with four of his priests brought up the rear.

Julian had eyes only for the Emperor. How often had he visualised this moment. But there was nothing dramatic in that smooth face, so carefully made up, half-surrounded by glossy, dark brown curls and topped by a diadem of precious stones. It might have been the face of a middle-aged actor. "He looks exactly like his image on a coin," thought Julian and he could not quite banish his second thought: "He doesn't look like a murderer at all—"

Only then he realised that everyone in the room was lying flat on the floor, in the proscynema Court etiquette demanded—except for the Empress and Augusta Constantina who were curtsying deeply.

He hesitated and only when he felt Mardonius' fingers shaking the hem of his cloak, he went down too.

"To the symbol of the Empire," he muttered, "not to you, Constantius."

It helped a little, but he still felt awkward and ashamed of himself in a sullen way.

I'd hate this business, if I were the Emperor, he found himself thinking. I'd abolish it—and quickly, too.

Then he could not help smiling at his own thoughts and only then he became a little worried. Nothing, not a single stage of all these emotions was lost on the Emperor. There was a long silence.

Then Constantius spoke: "You may get up."

They rose.

"We are happy to announce," went on the Emperor, "that we have repudiated the insolent petitions of our former general Magnentius. Always putting the welfare of the Empire before our own rights and wishes, we have considered the petitions with the utmost diligence and patience. We did not

answer it immediately; but last night after we had retired to rest, the shade of the great Constantine, embracing the corpse of his murdered son, our brother, rose before our eyes, his well-known voice awakened us to revenge, forbade us to despair of the State and assured us of the success and immortal glory that would crown the justice of our arms."

Clumsy, thought Julian. And, what is worse, badly phrased. Do they really believe that rigmarole? I wonder—

"This is the answer we gave to the envoys of Magnentius," continued the Emperor. "We shall make our preparations to smite this criminal, and God and the blessed Emperor, our father, will be on our side. But in the meantime, we need a reliable and trustworthy man to represent us in the provinces of the East—and we have found him. . . ."

Mardonius took half a step forward.

Julian's quick eye saw that his face was more strained than he had ever seen it before. The veins in his forehead pulsed like live animals.

"We found him in our close relative," proceeded the Emperor. "And we wish those present to acknowledge that we confer the honourable title of Cæsar the son of our late uncle, Julius Constantius—*Prince Gallus!*"

And he put his arm round the shoulders of the tall, muscular young legate at his side.

CHAPTER XV

Julian advanced slowly, step by step. He was totally unaware of what was going on around him; he did not even hear the dutiful acclamations of courtiers and officers; he did not see the face of Eusebia, radiant with innocent joy—nor the face of Mardonius, a tragic mask, completely rigid; the glittering figure of the Emperor, in his cuirass of gold and cloak of purple, was just a blurr. All Julian saw was the face of Gallus, young and strong and haughty; Julian's arms were outstretched, but he did not know it. He kept repeating, "Brother—brother—brother—brother—"

Gallus was basking in the admiration of the crowd, a smile of satisfaction on his full red lips. When, finally, he saw Julian, he seemed a little startled. Only then it began to dawn on him:

"What have we here," he asked. "By all the saints—I know this face—"

"Brother," said Julian for the fifth time. His throat was dry. "I'm Julian, brother. I didn't know—"

"Julian," said Gallus cheerfully. "But of course—how are you, little brother?"

"It is most edifying," said the thin nasal voice of the First Chamberlain "to witness the reunion of two brothers, separated for so long—and reunited through the grace and clemency of the Divine Emperor—" He almost burst with the hatred he had had to suppress. Everything had gone wrong; the Emperor had played at politics behind his back, by spiriting this uncouth, ill-mannered young man back from his exile in Thrace and now it was obvious that he had had the younger brother fetched from Cappadocia at the same time. But while he was speaking he had caught the expression on Constantius' face and had known in a flash that this reunion was a surprise to him also. He decided to risk a shot in the dark.

"Your Majesty's messengers must have wings, like the angels of God, to bring Prince Julian all the way from Cappadocia in time to witness his brother's nomination."

To his intense satisfaction he saw the first signs of suspicion clouding the Emperor's face. And he was not the only one who saw them.

Mardonius turned to the Empress: "Will it please Your Majesty to present me to His Majesty?"

Slightly bewildered, Eusebia complied.

"This is Mardonius, a most learned man, who was strongly recommended to us by the Most Venerable Bishop Arcadius."

The Most Venerable Bishop Arcadius felt somewhat ill at ease.

He remembered having written a letter of recommendation, because the Lady Volumnia had urged him to do it, almost insisted on it—a nuisance, women, always meddling—

He had recommended the man for a private audience with the Empress—and now it seemed to have become a State affair—and he had never seen the man in his life.

Mardonius had recovered from the sharp blow Fate had dealt to his plans. For one breathless moment he had thought that Cherubaal had deceived him; but then he decided that Cherubaal could have no motive for doing so. No—the little Chaldean was innocent; he had known nothing of Prince Gallus' existence—and that was not surprising. It was quite clear that the Emperor had kept it a secret from almost everybody—just as Julian's existence had been a secret too. Not even the two brothers themselves had known about each other. It was almost laughable; here he was, spinning the subtlest of all intrigues to get Julian into the saddle by making the Emperor's astrologer predict that the Constantian family would remain in power—and all he had achieved was

the cæsarship of Gallus, over whom he had no control whatever. All seemed lost then—the work of years.

But, was the situation really as bad as all that? He had summed up the young Cæsar very quickly—more brawn than brain, sensual, inexperienced. Looked more a rough young centurion than a legate—let alone a statesman. His only advantage over Julian was that he was older—about twenty-five. Julian was too young anyway for responsible office. In any case the family of Julius Constantius and Basilina had been reinstated. They could hardly make Gallus the Imperial Governor of the East, and send Julian back to his monastery in Macellum. Let us see.

"The Illustrious Eusebius has been extremely kind to me, Your Majesty," said Mardonius . . . and his statement astonished the First Chamberlain at least as much as the rest of the assembly.

"Eusebius? Kind? How's that?" asked the Emperor with unintentional sarcasm.

"He compared me with an angel," explained Mardonius with a little bow towards the First Chamberlain. "Prince Julian arrived in Byzantium in my company. I have had the honour of being his tutor for some time."

"Prince Julian's tutor?" asked the First Chamberlain. "Since when do they have tutors in monasteries?"

Again Mardonius bowed. "It was the wish of his former guardian, the late Bishop of Nicomedia, that Prince Julian should have the education in keeping with his rank. He told me explicitly that this was not only his own wish but rather that of His Imperial Majesty. And you may believe me, Illustrious, I have done my poor best to fulfil the Emperor's wish."

Clever liar, thought Eusebius. Dangerously clever liar. The Bishop is as dead as a dog and the Emperor cannot possibly contradict this.

He said smiling: "Will Your Majesty permit me to recommend Mardonius for a suitable reward?"

"Certainly, certainly," said Constantius, still trying to sort out her riddle and finding it more and more difficult. "What do you suggest, Eusebius?"

"One seat in the Crown Council is vacant," said Eusebius quickly. "I'm sure Your Majesty would wish to have a man of such learning among his Councillors at Court—now that the education of the young Prince has obviously been perfectly completed."

Constantius' suspicious eyes had been shifting ceaselessly from one skilled duelist to the other. He understood only half of what was going on but this much he did understand, that Eusebius regarded the other eunuch as a dangerous character

and wanted to have him as much as possible under his control and jurisdiction.

"Very well, Fusebius," he said, to Mardonius' dismay. "Have the necessary documents prepared immediately. As for the young Prince—"

Everybody turned towards the two young men who were still arm-in-arm. A short, very short, whispered dialogue had passed between them.

"Where have they been keeping you?"

"Near Condynos—in Thrace. And you?"

"In Cappadocia. Macellum. Do you know anything about Mother?"

"Not a thing—and don't ask—"

Now, under the Emperor's eye, they stood to attention.

"Very young still," said Constantius. "In fact, half a child. We shall see to it that life gives you what is yours by right. Have you a wish of your own, Julian?"

It was on the very tip of the young man's tongue to ask about his mother, but Gallus' eyes darted a sharp warning.

"I should like to study in Athens, Your Majesty."

Constantius laughed, but he was not displeased. Julian might have asked for a military command, as a tribune, or even a legate, or for a post as a vice-governor—instead he asked to be allowed to read books and listen to lectures—obviously there was not overmuch ambition here, which was just as well.

"You have our permission," he said graciously. "And you will receive all the necessary facilities."

"Oh thank you, Your Majesty."

Julian tried to catch Mardonius' eye, but the eunuch looked straight ahead, his face set.

"Ah, Constantina," said the Emperor. "Prince Gallus will sit next to you at dinner. I hope you will be friends—"

Gallus bowed in his gauche way and Constantina, alone understanding the implication, began to appraise him as though he were a race-horse on whom she might wish to bet.

In the courtyard Police Captain Glabrio and his twelve officers were waiting with their horses and a coach near the Southern Gate. After a while a centurion of the Domestics appeared with a scroll and behind him half a dozen Guards, dragging three pale men in Court dress between them.

Glabrio saluted the Centurion whose response was rather casual—the Lifeguards having but little respect for the police force—and signed the scroll, while his men were pushing the three wretches into the coach. Only the leader of the

delegation had been allowed to return to his chief, with the Emperor's reply.

Civil war had started.

To Julian the rest of the day was a 'crazy and incoherent dream. He found himself talking to people he had never seen before in his life, men and women and eunuchs, high officials and their ladies, legates in gala uniforms.

The Court poet, Faustus, involved him in a long discussion on art, just in order to find out the colour of his eyes—as he wished to write an ode about the “youngest flower of Constantine's blossoming tree.” Mothers of debutantes tried to invite him to their houses. He had to bow and smile and find answers to endless questions. And all the time all he really wanted was to be with that radiant young demigod, who had suddenly appeared from nowhere, and who was flesh of his flesh and blood of his blood.

But Prince Gallus was the real hero of the day—everyone wanted to be seen by him, to congratulate him; better still, to make an impression on him. He was Cæsar of the East—that meant he would need a court of his own; whole galaxies of jobs were waiting to be filled. Surely he would make sweeping changes in the High Command on the Persian frontier. Surely he needed equipment for his troops, new decorations for the interior of his palace—wherever that palace was going to be—in Alexandria, in Antioch, in Tarsus. No ruler could just take over and leave things as they were.

There would be changes in every sphere and that meant that many adroit people would make a great deal of money. Therefore it was only the lesser people who clung around Julian, those who had no hope of getting a fat job or a fat commission.

Then the Majordomo appeared, to report to the Master of Ceremonies. The Master of Ceremonies reported to the First Chamberlain, and that horrible old man announced in his unbearable voice that all those present would proceed to the Banquet Hall.

The Emperor walked through the door, chatting with the Empress.

The Augusta Constantina followed, but turned back and showed Prince Gallus her strong white teeth in a flashing smile. He grinned and sauntered up to her. Julian was still marvelling at such a quickly made friendship, when he saw the bow of the Master of Ceremonies in front of him and his long ivory staff beckoning. At the same time he felt that a hundred eyes were gazing at him and he suddenly realised

that it was his turn to walk out as the only remaining member of the Imperial family . . . he had been holding up the entire Court!

He murmured an apology, realising almost immediately that this was contrary to all etiquette and stumbled awkwardly towards the door, conscious as never before of his jerky, ungraceful gait and his angular movements.

But the next moment he saw the humour of the situation, so like a fairy story, with the poor little shepherd who became a prince and did not know how to behave at Court.

He laughed—much louder than he intended to.

Everybody followed, two and two, in their order of precedence, jealously watched by the man with the ivory staff—for heaven help him if the wife of a patricius found herself behind, and not in front of, the wife of a prætorian præfect.

Through the door and down the broad staircase of yellow Numidian marble, thickly laid with carpets of Oriental design, with armed Domestics in red and gold standing like grim statues at regular intervals; across the huge hall to the Banquet Room.

From behind a huge purple curtain an invisible orchestra of flutes, harps and cymbals played cheerful music; endless tables were decked with white linen, silver and precious vases. The Master of Ceremonies had spirited himself into the room—no one could have said how he actually got there—and placed the guests with a sort of silky precision—the order had had to be changed at the last minute, owing to the unexpected addition of Prince Julian and his tutor.

Slaves were showering freshly cut flowers over the guests and putting wreaths of roses on their heads. Dish upon dish was placed before them.

Bishop Arcadius rose and said a short prayer, to which they all listened with their heads bent, and the meal began.

The nomenclators read the number and description of the dishes to be served—so that the guests could escape the terrible danger of stuffing themselves to capacity, only to find that their favourite dish was to be served next.

Julian listened in astonishment to the melodious voice of the young Nomenclator nearest to his couch, who recited “truffled fieldfares” and “artichoke-hearts with pheasant livers” as though they were lines of Lucretius or Catullus; he saw the ecstatic rapture on the face of fat old Senator Attilianus, lying next to him on his couch and asked what this endless enumeration of dishes was for.

The Senator looked at him in blank amazement and explained.

"To me, as to any real connoisseur, this is the best part of the meal," he added. "It's the only way in which one can enjoy *all* the courses—in the spirit."

"I agree," nodded Julian, waving away a slave who was trying to fill his goblet with Chian wine. "In fact, I think it would do most of the people here a great deal of good, if they followed your example—and left it at that."

"I never have more than sixteen or seventeen courses," said the Senator, slightly piqued. The young Prince seemed to have been brought up on Spartan lines. Besides, his explanation had made him miss at least half a dozen pearls of the gastronomic art and now it was difficult to form an opinion of the most desirable choice to be made. But then, it was better to get on friendly terms with this ungainly young man.

"May I enquire whether you have made a vow not to drink wine?" he questioned when Julian refused the third attempt to fill his goblet.

"No, but I suppose we shall drink the Emperor's health?"

"Certainly, certainly—"

"And I never drink more than one goblet at a meal."

Senator Attilianus was horrified. "If it's your health, Prince Julian, that prevents you—?"

"Not at all. At least not my health as an individual—only my health as a member of the human race. People drink far more than is good for them."

"Come, come, Prince Julian," said a very beautiful and very painted lady, lying opposite him. "At your age you should enjoy life."

"I intend to enjoy life at any age," replied Julian. "Yet another reason for me not to drink too much."

"Moderation in all things is the motto of the philosopher," applauded a voice with a strong foreign accent; and turning, Julian saw a tall slim Oriental in Persian Court dress bowing to him with exquisite courtesy. The man looked striking in an exotic way, with his ivory skin and the beautifully kept blue-black beard, entwined with short ropes of pearls. There were huge pearls in his ears as well, and a priceless triple rope hung around his neck.

"All philosophers are heathen," pouted the painted lady. "I thought you were a good Christian, Prince Hormisdas!"

So this was Hormisdas, the refugee Persian Prince, who had been fighting with Constantius' army against his own countrymen. Julian had heard Mardonius mention him more than once, when they discussed the political and military situation of the Empire.

It was said that he had left Persia because the Grand King

Sapor had stolen his favourite wife, to give her to one of his own sons. Hormisdas had killed her and escaped. Since then he had become a roaring success in Byzantine society.

"I have become a Christian," said the Persian with a slow smile. "I used to believe in other deities before, but I found them rather inopportune. Besides one can hardly expect them to exercise much influence in countries where they have no temples. But the fact that I am a Christian does not prevent me from reading—"

"Of course not," said Julian enthusiastically. "Religion is a matter of faith—philosophy is a matter of knowledge."

"It's easy to see that Prince Julian is a scholar himself," said the Persian with another of his little bows. "And here the question arises whether the moderation becoming to a philosopher should be extended to all things—even to his thirst for knowledge."

"Impossible," said Julian, his cheeks glowing.

"Then," smiled Hormisdas, "I venture to predict that Prince Julian will become a drunkard for knowledge."

Julian was enthralled. The painted lady was bored. Senator Attilianus was attacking the second of his sixteen or seventeen courses. He had given Julian up as a bad job. Precocious little know-it-all—no good.

At the upper end of the table the Augusta Constantina was flirting with Prince Gallus. Epaphroditus, her freedman, standing behind her chair, was suffering the tortures of hell. He had been her favourite for over six months, and his hopes had run high. He knew now that the episode of Epaphroditus had come to an end and Constantina knew that he knew and was enjoying herself thoroughly.

Prince Gallus—over fifteen years younger than she—was just what she needed. If only Constantius had had the sense to place Bishop Arcadius a little further away. Clergy at the dinner table were a nuisance—one could hardly tell any story in their presence. They weren't all as bad as that, but Arcadius certainly was.

Gallus—though inexperienced—had the sense to laugh at her dubious remarks. He sensed now what the Emperor expected of him, and was quite willing to play his part. What a change, after the monotonous time with the Thirteenth legion in Thrace! He had been registered under another name and was closely watched by spies, both official and otherwise. Service, drinking, the peasant women in the villages around Condyros—not unpleasant, really, but with nothing glamorous about it. This sleek feline creature in her glittering gold dress was something! A man could have a hell of a good

time with her, married to her or not. And next week he was going East, as Number One of the whole outfit. And that would be something!

He ate ravenously and emptied one goblet after another.

Eusebia was happy, although she usually disliked official banquets. For years and years she had longed for an opportunity to arise so that her husband might atone for the night after her father-in-law's death. And it had happened and the curse was taken away from their heads. She whispered to Bishop Arcadius that she wished to have a new church built in the capital, a basilica to commemorate to-day's event.

The Bishop nodded gravely, with his mouth full of asparagus.

The Emperor felt tired after the excitement of the day. He ate and drank hardly anything and did not talk at all.

The First Chamberlain was exchanging courtesies with everybody; he could exercise a smooth sort of charm when he wanted to, and to-day it was indicated; he had to make up for lost ground. It was, of course, a grave mistake on the part of the Emperor to trust these two boys, whose father had had to be executed, and it was particularly disagreeable for him, who had been the instrument of the execution. Perhaps, if his cousin Barbatio was to be given the High Command under Cæsar Gallus—

At the very end of the table Mardonius was chatting cheerfully with his neighbours. No one would have guessed that to-day had been the blackest day in his life since he recovered consciousness in the house of his friend Dion. Julian's desire to be sent to Athens, and his own nomination as Member of the Crown Council had made things infinitely worse than they were already through the sudden return of Gallus from the dead. In Athens Julian would be far away from his supervision—and it was a dangerous city for a young man, the most dangerous of all for Julian, with his thirst for knowledge.

Libanius was in Athens—he, to whom nothing was sacred, and in whom Julian had shown far too much interest as it was. Athens was the hotbed of modern thought. He had planted the seeds so carefully in Julian's soul; but it had taken him a long time to undermine the influence of the monks, and even now . . . Not, of course, that Athens was likely to make him an orthodox Christian again. But the Athenian atmosphere was destructive of any belief—whether in Christ or in Jupiter. And it was not likely that they would allow him to visit Julian there—they had pinned him down

at Court very cleverly. He was a prisoner in a golden cage, like most courtiers.

An entirely new programme had to be worked out. If only he had known something about the existence of Gallus. He had listened to that young man's conversation. A crude type, a bully, and the sort of refinement that he was going to acquire from sleeping with the Augusta Constantina was hardly likely to help. She was the most impulsive, unpredictable and vicious creature. The life of her first husband had been unmitigated hell. And he had been an experienced man. What would happen to Gallus?

There was a bit of serious thinking to be done to-night, as soon as this noisy feast was over. For the time being, however, Mardonius covered his thoughts with light and brilliant conversation.

If the Court was to be his field of activity in the near future, at least it was just as well to win friends—

Emperor and Empress, the Augusta Constantina and Bishop Arcadius retired after the toast given by Prince Gallus, carefully instructed in the performance of his first official duty by the whispered promptings of the Master of Ceremonies.

He then took over as Symposiarch—ruler of the banquet.

Julian saw that the couch next to his brother's was now empty, and tried hard to catch his eye. He felt a deep longing to talk to him.

Of all the men and women around him Julian was the only one who was sober, and it was a most awkward feeling.

Prince Hormisdas was whispering flowery compliments into the dainty ear of the lady beside him, and as her head was now lying on his shoulder, he could do so without much physical exertion. Senator Attilianus, having completed his menu, was now drinking steadily, guffawing from time to time, when he thought that someone's story required such polite reaction.

Gallus seemed to enjoy his rôle as ruler of the banquet. As the custom demanded, he gave silly little orders: "Everyone will now take seven sips of wine," and "Everyone will now sing," with which at least those sitting near him had to comply. At last his eye fell on his brother; he grinned and nodded.

Julian, rightly or wrongly, took it for a sign to join him, rose and walked over.

"Slanting," murmured Prince Hormisdas to the lady whose head rested on his shoulder. "Ever seen a man w-walking

slanting—my—b-beautiful? L-look at him! P-perhaps his ph-philosophy is slanting too? What you s-say?"

But the lady was fast asleep.

Julian lay down on Augusta Constantina's empty couch. Gallus was still grinning, "G-goo' fun," he said, "awf'ly goo' fun. 'Joying yourself, li'l brother?"

"I have so much to talk to you about, Gallus."

"Have you now? 'Course you have. Hey, somebody! Fill my li'l brother's goblet! T-take C-Constantina's goblet—it isn't poisoned. B-beautiful woman, isn't she?"

"Can't we go somewhere else, Gallus?" murmured Julian. "I do so want to talk to you—"

"B-beautiful woman," said Gallus obstinately. Then his face lit up—an idea had dawned on him.

"You're right, b-brother mine. We'll g-go places. C-come along—"

He got up, not without difficulty, but when two slaves tried to help him, he pushed them back so roughly that they stumbled and one of them almost fell. They regained their balance very quickly, and stood stiffly to attention as before.

"C-come along, b-brother," repeated Gallus. "We're off. Ah—my crown—"

He took the banquet ruler's wreath off his head and placed it with a bang on the bald pate of Eusebius.

"You rule now," he chuckled. "Somebody t-told me that you're doing it anyway."

The First Chamberlain smiled affably—but his eyes did not smile.

Gallus put one arm round Julian's shoulders and began to walk out. He waved cheerfully to the Majordomo, standing near the door—he did not bat an eyelid—and stamped past him.

"Skinny, aren't you?" he said to Julian, feeling his shoulders. Then to an aide-de-camp, who had turned up from nowhere: "I wanna coach—no—a chariot—and a driver who knows this li'l city. G-get going."

The Aide-de-Camp saluted smartly and ran.

"See?" said Gallus triumphantly. "I say g-go—he g-goes. I say c-come—he c-comes. That's how l-life'll be from now on. I'm C-Cæsar."

"You've had many drinks, Gallus," said Julian.

His brother grinned. "T-true enough. So I had. Many, b-but not t-too many. Where's that louse with the chariot?" he bellowed suddenly. "Are you keeping C-Cæsar waiting?"

But it took the Aide-de-Camp a few minutes to carry out the order. There were hundreds of coaches in the courtyard,

and the chariot had to be brought from the stables and steered safely through the mass of vehicles. Slaves were rushing about with big torches.

Gallus was fuming. But his anger did not last long. It cooled as suddenly as it had flared up. "L-lovely horses," he said and patted the nearest one, a beautiful prancing bay. The charioteer, a Greek, flashed his teeth.

"But where are we going?" asked Julian.

Gallus laughed. "Dunno yet. M-must ask first!"

He jumped on to the chariot and began to whisper into the Greek's ear. The man flashed his teeth again and nodded.

"Come on up," shouted Gallus and grasped Julian's tunic.

A moment later the chariot was on its way, moving cautiously until the main gate had been reached. After that the charioteer gave full rein. The cool night air rushed past their faces.

It had been a good idea of Gallus' after all, although it was impossible to talk in this thundering vehicle. It was doing him good, in any case. Streets were gliding towards them, past them, towards them, past them. Round the corner, straight on, round the corner, round again. "Where are we?" shouted Julian. Gallus laughed: "*He* knows—I hope!" And he pointed his thumb in the direction of the charioteer.

More corners. And then the chariot slowed up and stopped in a dirty street in front of a large house.

"That's it, I suppose," said Gallus. "C-come on in, Julian!"

He jumped down and Julian followed. They walked up to the house, but to Julian's surprise the door did not open immediately, and no slaves were to be seen. The charioteer clapped his hands and a dim light appeared in one of the small windows. Still they waited and finally the door was opened by a lady, so bedecked with jewellery that every movement she made caused a jingle: "Welcome," she said in a husky voice. "Will the noble guests step in, please—this way."

A short corridor, reeking of perfume—a round room with settees and carpets, a tasteless but elaborately worked lamp shed a dim, rose-coloured light. The lady was about forty-five, and her face was a mask of paint. "The house is yours, Legate," she cajoled, "and with it all that you may desire—you and your sweet little friend—"

Julian had a feeling of nausea, without quite knowing why. Perhaps it was the stale oversweet perfume that seemed to hang in the air like a musky cloud.

Gallus drew a handful of coins from a slit in his belt and

threw them at her. She caught them with amazing adroitness and her eyes widened at the sight of the gold.

"Thank you, Illustrious, thank you," she purred. In the next instant her voice had changed to a raucous shout: "Theano—Zoe—Paula!"

Only when the women came in, more indecent in their flimsy, transparent dress than if they had been completely naked, did Julian realise with horror where he was.

Gallus, seeing his embarrassment, laughed uproariously.

"More," he commanded, "more girls, my good woman—and wine! The b-best you've got."

"Certainly, Illustrious Legate," the painted hag screeched, delighted to oblige. She ran out of the room, and despite the giggling and obscene compliments offered by Theano, Zoe and Paula, they could hear her giving orders in the adjoining rooms, orders that seemed to cause pandemonium. There were running feet, shrill laughter, and the unmistakable sound of male voices raised in protest.

"What are you disturbing me for? Haven't I paid you what you wanted, you bitch?"

"Go away!"

"You can come back to-morrow. Now get out."

"One would think that the Emperor had come to your lousy place!"

"Well, what if he has?—you drunken son of a cheat! Get out now, I say—before I throw you out!"

"You can't throw me out!"

"Can't I? Jedrim—Basiliscos—get him out! Tidy the room! You can come back to-morrow—I'll only charge you half price. That's right, Basiliscos—get a move on. In you go, girls!"

Splutterings of rage, foul obscenities, voices that seemed to vomit words, and another half-dozen women poured into the room, tidying their hair and casting curious glances from black-circled eyes on the two visitors, for whom the Mistress had made all this fuss.

"But Gallus—this is awful," pleaded Julian. "Let's get out of here—"

The air was full of heaving, perspiring, cheaply scented femininity, powdered flesh, dyed hair, breasts erect, breasts hanging—they seemed to have shameless faces of their own.

"You won't find more beautiful girls in all Byzantium," cried the Mistress. "Take your choice, noble Sirs, or have them all, if you wish—"

"Gallus, I entreat you—"

"Do you want them to dance for you, noble Sirs? Or do you wish to see some very special attractions?"

Julian saw Gallus' eyes sparkle; his brother's face, young and strong and healthy, had become that of a satyr; his mouth twitched.

"Don't be a stupid baby, Julian—this is goo' fun—"

Julian tore the edge of his cloak out of his brother's hand and darted towards the door. Two of the women shrieked as he pushed them savagely aside; he ran along the corridor, bumped against the door, tore it open and ran out blindly. It seemed as if his feet were touching slimy serpents; formless carcasses, squelching mud. Only when he was completely out of breath and exhausted, did he come to a staggering halt; and only then did he realise that it was raining; the soil really was muddy and soaked; a crust of dirt had caked round his sandals and even the hem of his tunic was splashed with mud.

Everything was dirty—the tunic, the street, the city, the world—everything was dirty.

Water didn't help—it only made things worse. It even caused the dirt. It was a baptism of mud, befouling everything. Horrible.

If only one could die.

This wasn't the place to live in. It was a place to rot, inside and out. Something should come and destroy it—destroy it utterly. . . .

Where was he?

The very houses were shapeless here, bent and crooked and sinister, like malicious cripples.

Over there was a large building with a cross on top—a church, obviously. An Arian church? Or Catholic? Or Sabelian? Christian, anyway.

Give us this day our daily bread—send us men to sleep with, men who pay with gold—

Let the Emperor murder someone so that we can take his place—

Poison, said Mardonius—and he was right.

I find a brother, flesh of my flesh and blood of my blood—and this is it. Rotten—rotten—rotten.

The whole world is rotten.

Was there really a God called Christ?

If there was, his influence was corroding and poisonous.

But if Mardonius is right—why don't his gods destroy the Christian influence—why don't they tear down these churches?

A blinding flash, disintegrating into a long zig-zag arc.

The crash seemed to shake the very earth. For a split second it seemed as if the building with the cross were on fire.

Then it was all over, but for the long-drawn-out rumbling of dying thunder.

Julian stared, his eyes wide open.

The rain was lashing against his face and body but he did not seem to feel it.

"Is it Thou, Jupiter?" he whispered.

PART TWO

A.D. 353-356

CHAPTER XVI

"This," said Oribasius, giving his cloak to a slave, "is the craziest place in the world."

There were loud protests from half a dozen different voices.

"How dare you say such a thing about Athens!"

"About the citadel of wisdom!"

"The crown of knowledge."

"Go back to the provinces where you came from."

Oribasius was now taking off his tunic.

"I don't come from the provinces," he said, totally unperturbed. "I come from the Peiræus. The *Narbonensis* has just arrived from Byzantium."

Naked now, he began to smear his short, sturdy body with oil.

"Well—what about it? Anybody interesting on board?"

"The *Narbonensis*—that's the ship that stops at Ephesus. Maybe we'll get a few new mystics."

"Nonsense—mystics aren't for export," said Oribasius. "They sit on their behinds and stare at their own navels. After twenty years of that they're convinced that their navel is the world, and that nothing else exists. They even forget the behind they sit on."

A few of the students laughed, a few were annoyed.

"You're a swine, Oribasius—you don't believe in mystics—you don't believe in philosophy—you don't believe in religion—is there anything you *do* believe in?"

"I believe in the negative qualities of your brain," said Oribasius, plastering his legs with oil.

When the laughter had subsided, he added: "I believe in certain qualities of the human body as a whole, too. For instance, when I put enough pressure on your neck, Gregory, it'll break, and there will be one theologian the less in the world."

"And one physician the less, too," retorted his potential victim. "They execute people for murder, you know."

"Not for surgical murder," replied Oribasius, "or there would be far fewer physicians left."

"Holy Aristotle, he's right," exclaimed one of the students, fumbling with a pair of boxing gloves. "Look at Magnus!"

"I thought Magnus was the best physician in Greece."

"You must have heard that from him!"

"He can certainly talk—he could prove to Hercules that he needed treatment for muscular development."

"Anything I might have to say about Magnus," said Oribasius, "would be grossly unethical."

"Oh very well, keep your own secrets," cried Corax, one of Athens' more famous exquisites. "But perhaps I may be allowed to repeat what I heard from a very reliable source; he keeps over five hundred mutilated donkeys in his stables."

"Five hundred donkeys? Does he bathe in asses' milk like the late Poppæa Sabina? Or does he bleed them to prepare new medicines?"

"Why are they all mutilated?"

"He's talked their hindlegs off," said Corax.

The young men roared with laughter.

"Who told you that one?"

"Prince Julian, of course," said Corax.

"You're right—it's very like him."

"Think so? He's been frightfully serious lately."

"Oh, nonsense! Just because he's grown a beard?"

"I wish he hadn't—it does so spoil his beauty," complained Corax.

"Well, there wasn't much to spoil, you know."

"Shut up, you fathead—suppose someone hears you—"

"Oh, he wouldn't mind—he's not the touchy kind—"

"I'm not so sure—and after all, he *is* the Emperor's cousin."

"One of these days you'll find you're mutilated yourself, my boy, and it won't be your hindlegs which are missing."

"The fact that you still have yours is the only thing that distinguishes you from Magnus' victims!"

"Wit," said a beautifully modulated voice, "should never disintegrate into rudeness."

"Libanius!"

"Here in the gymnasium— Sir, we appreciate the honour."

The famous philosopher was slightly built, with grey hair, sharp eyes under bushy, black eyebrows; in his short, grey beard the humorous hand of Fate had left a black streak. It was said that the sharp wrinkles round his mouth were due to the pitying smile he had worn for thirty years and certainly there had been no one in Athens for a long time who had dared to stand up against his extraordinarily acute brain.

"Libanius," wrote a contemporary, "can dissect a man into a thousand pieces, prove the worthlessness of each one of them, and then put them together again so quickly that the man would never know that anything had happened to him."

He was Professor of Apodeictic, Biastic and Paralogistic Logic, and Professor of Rhetoric of the university founded by Marcus Aurelius; there was no one alive who could interpret Plato as he did.

He seldom came to the gymnasium, though he appreciated and even encouraged physical training; he did not like the atmosphere of the palaestra: "It offends all my senses," he would say. "The glaring sunlight hampers my vision—the perspiration of bodies in combined and exaggerated action offends my nose—the thundering noise of excited spectators troubles my ears—the perpetual dust is not appreciated by my mouth and tongue—and the touch of oiled hands makes me shudder and stains my cloak."

"Who is fighting whom?" he asked now. "I see you are ready for action, Corax."

"Yes—and so is Oribasius—but I don't think you know my learned friend—"

"I won't shake hands with you, Sir," grinned the physician. "I'm all oily, but I'm honoured to meet the man who is reputed to be able to prove anything he wants to."

"If one is modest enough," replied Libanius, "one can always achieve that—one only needs to limit wishes in the right proportion to one's ability to prove them."

The students applauded. There were at least thirty of them there now, forming a semi-circle around the famous man: discus, bow and arrow and boxing gloves were forgotten.

"But what were you arguing about when I came in?" asked Libanius.

"Oh, it was all my fault, I suppose," said Oribasius. "I said that this was a crazy city, and ever since, these brainy birds of yours have done their utmost to prove my thesis."

There were loud protests, until Libanius raised his hand.

"And the explanation of your thesis, if you will be good enough to give it to us?"

The physician shrugged his shoulders. "Well, Sir, I've just come from the Peiræus; a ship had arrived from Byzantium: the *Narbonensis*—as you know, she always brings news from the capital; but not one of these young seekers of knowledge asked me about the news—all they wanted to know was whether anyone interesting was on board."

"And the news was more interesting than the people on board?"

"Well—there has been a great battle, at Mursa—"

"Oh, the war," said Corax. "Who cares . . . ?"

"There have always been wars and there always will be—the only aim of the true intellectual with regard to war is to keep out of it."

"Well, I don't know," interposed Gregory, the theologian. "After all, there is a political Chair at our university."

"True," said Libanius. "But politics is the art of avoiding war. Politics is the real war of the intellectual. Only when human stupidity enforces its course and curse on the minds of men, the sighing politician must hand over his power to the butchers in uniform. We here, in happy Athens, are fortunate enough to care about those things that really matter; things of the intellect. Speaking about the intellect—" he added louder—"has anyone seen Prince Julian to-day?"

"He was supposed to come here," said Corax. "I don't know what's held him up."

"A rare brain, my friends," praised Libanius. "We must all be proud of his company. Many a time I have found him deliberately withholding his knowledge and wit, in order to give a lesser man a chance—in contrast to Æsop's fable: here is a lion in a donkey's skin."

"The lion roars his thanks," laughed Julian, emerging from the crowd.

Libanius, who had seen him approaching for some time, played his surprise act beautifully.

"I am sorry you overheard my somewhat drastic comparison, Prince Julian—it was not destined for your ears. Still—I suppose it can do little harm to someone who really seeks the truth—to hear himself appraised—"

"—by his intellectual superior," bowed Julian. "And it is only my respect for this fact that prevents me from taking sides against you in your argument with the learned man whom I have not met before—"

"Oribasius, the physician," said Corax by way of introduction. "He believes in nothing except the void—he's joining us in the wrestling course."

"A wise resolution," applauded Libanius. "Having learnt everything about setting broken bones, it must be interesting for him to find out how to break them."

"An excellent scheme, Oribasius," cried Corax. "All you need to do is to apply what you have learnt in the palæstra—and you will never want for patients."

"So much wit is overwhelming," shuddered the physician. "Come on, Corax, let's have a go."

"Oh no—you're not going to have me as your first patient; you're much too strong for me. Why don't you try yourself out on Prince Julian?"

The two men looked at each other.

An intelligent man, thought Julian, but that doesn't mean much. They're all intelligent here; but he looks sincere—and that is unusual.

So this is the famous Prince, thought Oribasius. Looks older than twenty-three or four or whatever he is. He's as vain as a peacock, too—but at least he knows it.

Damon, the trainer, came up to the group—a big placid ox of a man, with cauliflower ears and a nose broken in two places. He had a trick of cutting out all unessential words. It was sheer laziness of course—Damon was too good a trainer to give himself airs.

"You opponents?" he asked, wagging his head from Julian to Oribasius and back.

That decided it.

"I think so," said Julian; Oribasius just nodded.

Julian began to take off his clothes. Oribasius watched him.

I'm stronger, he thought. And my bones are heavier. But he doesn't look too bad—anyway, Damon seems to think we are a good pair and he should know. Well then . . .

He observed with hidden amusement how Julian politely but firmly refused Corax' offer to help him oil his body.

Then Damon led them to the wrestling corner, and the whole group followed with Libanius in the middle—all except Gregory, the theologian. "I've got to be back in the lecture hall in half an hour," he said. "And I haven't done my weight-lifting exercises yet."

"Most suitable," exclaimed Libanius, "for the man whose profession it will be to lift weights from the human soul."

Gregory did not reply. He hated flippancy where religious matters were concerned. There was too much of it in Athens, because there was too much of it in Libanius. With a deep frown he began to lift his iron bars; one—two—three—four—all this fussing about that young Imperial goat was really rather disgusting—five—six—they'd only spoil him completely—seven—he was getting more and more cocky ever day—eight—nine—and then later on he'd be given a province or become a Cæsar in several provinces, like his brother Gallus—ten—eleven—he'd be just as arrogant and inefficient as that fellow seemed to be—twelve—flippant and vain enough he was already—thirteen—and you didn't know at all what he believed, if anything—fourteen—fifteen—for whenever he argued with a Sabellian, he took the Manichæan point of view, and with a Catholic he promptly became an Arian—sixteen—

He stopped, smiling acidly, as wild yells came from the

wrestlers' corner. The Prince must have won, he thought. They wouldn't yell as much as that for Oribasius.

But he was wrong: Oribasius, making use of an opening, had thrown his Imperial opponent over his shoulder and then pinned him to the ground.

"Foul, foul!" screamed Corax. "You twisted his arm, Oribasius—"

"He didn't—"

"Yes, he did—I saw him do it."

Julian sat up. Blood was trickling from his left nostril but he laughed: "What nonsense!" he said. "It wasn't a foul at all—I thought I had him, and got careless and of course he's much too good to let that pass."

He got up, wiping his nose. "I'd like to have a return match a week hence, Oribasius," he said. "And I won't be careless next time, I promise you."

The physician nodded. "You're better than I thought. I shall be delighted to meet you again in a week—you may easily beat me next time. I wouldn't like to lay too much money on myself."

"I still think it was a foul," sulked Corax.

But no one bothered to reply.

"I'll have a look at your nose in a minute," said the physician. "But we'd better have a quick bath first. How did it happen?"

"I fell on it," laughed Julian. "I always do—it sticks out too far. But Libanius is right as usual—it's an advantage to have a physician as an opponent."

"Your lesson, Sir," said Damon to Corax.

The young Thracian nodded condescendingly. "I'm quite ready, my good Damon."

"About fouls," said the trainer. "Aren't many. This is one—"

And Corax found himself sitting on the floor, rubbing his calves.

Before he could complain, Damon helped him up and said: "This is another—"

And Corax made the biggest somersault of his life.

"Only one more," said Damon gently. But the young Thracian had had enough and ran towards the massage room, tears of rage in his pretty eyes.

Oribasius grinned at Damon and the trainer grinned back. Most of these young men came from rich and influential families—Corax' father was a patricius—and ordinarily a trainer was very ill advised to take liberties with them. But Damon was no ordinary trainer. Damon was an institution, with two Olympic victories to his credit; in distance running

and with the discus. All Corax might try, was to hire a couple of brawlers and pay them to beat up Damon. Oribasius mentioned something of the kind to Julian as they were walking towards the baths.

"He'd better hire half a dozen," smiled Julian, "or Damon will truss them up like chickens and deliver them at Corax' house. He's done that sort of thing once or twice, you know. How is it that we've never met before, Oribasius?"

"Simple, Prince Julian. I don't study talking—and you don't study medicine."

"Aren't you a little hard on us poor rhetors?" asked Libanius. "Maybe you will change your mind when you have seen more of our work; join us this afternoon in my lecture hall in the Stoa."

"Yes, do, Oribasius," pleaded Julian. "I have a feeling that Libanius is going to give us a treat to-day."

"Thanks for the invitation, Sir," said the young physician. "Unless I'm called away to see a patient, I'll come."

"Splendid," said Julian.

"After all," surmised Oribasius, "it's interesting to see from the medical point of view to what degree of elasticity the human tongue can be trained."

Oribasius was as good as his word. When Libanius walked into the lecture hall with his quick nervous steps, there was the physician, sitting next to the young Prince in the front row. Quick friendship, thought the uncrowned king of Athens, but it won't last long—not if Julian insists on the *other* way—but then—which of the two is the minor evil? However—

He addressed the assembly in his usual style.

"My friends, we shall once more have the pleasure of sharpening our intellect; the finest weapon that man has received from a gracious god-head, about whose name or attributes we are not disposed to quarrel" (subdued laughter) "—especially as the quarrelling is done with the utmost zeal and emphasis by all those whose intellect is not sharp enough to solve the riddle and who therefore feel inclined to take refuge in the quick-flowing stream of their emotions—an analogy, which I trust, will not embolden the servants of Poseidon and Amphitrite to claim all non-intellectuals for themselves." (Obedient laughter.) "We, who recognise the divine present of the intellect as the supreme gift, can have only pity for the utter lack of tolerance, as shown by the various protagonists of various theories; to us it seems possible that *all* their theories may well be right—in which case there would be as little need to fight each other as there is

need for the liver to fight the kidneys or the stomach, instead of tolerating their rightful functions, so useful, although so different from its own. Most of the world's intolerance originates from the fanatical desire of some liver or other to make other livers out of organs whose functions are of an entirely different nature. But you can't tell that to the liver; the liver will insist that the world's problems will be solved as soon as all the other organs have become livers too—provided that the original liver will then, of course, have the position of the central or supreme liver with the function of telling all other livers exactly what's what!" (Applause.)

"We shudder to think, my learning and learned friends, what the human organism as a whole would be, if the liver ever achieved its truly infernal purpose. On the other hand, I would deplore it, if you, my patient listeners, should take this as an argument against the advisability of imitating and perhaps in due course surpassing the rhetorical system of Libanius, for fear of filling the intellectual world with too many editions of myself." (Laughter.) "The danger is perhaps not quite as great as it may appear, even considering that our friend Alcæus delivered a speech at last week's Proconsular dinner, which was an exact repetition of my own speech three weeks earlier." (Laughter.) "I must say I was astonished when I was told about it, if only for the fact that I had been speaking about agricultural problems, whereas Alcæus' was a eulogy of the illustrious Proconsul's administration *and* family." (Loud laughter.) "Now to something new—if there is something new; the sacred book of the Jews assures us that there is not. Unless I am mistaken—in Ecclesiastes?—thank you my friend Gregory. I suppose it depends upon what you mean by 'new'—but I shall let you judge for yourselves. Like the sphinx. I shall ask you to answer a simple riddle on a logical basis: once upon a time there were three famous magicians: Iamblichus, Ædesius and Maximus." (Loud laughter. The names were famous in the intellectual world.) "Iamblichus had a crystal in which he could see almost anything going on almost anywhere—Ædesius had a flying carpet—and Maximus was the proud possessor of an apple; whoever ate that apple, would instantly be cured of any illness—at least of the body. Well—one fine day the three were together and Iamblichus, perhaps a little bored with the conversation of the other two, looked into his crystal and saw that the Grand King of Persia was dangerously ill—dying in fact. He told the others and they set off on Ædesius' flying carpet; the carpet flew them in no time right into the Grand King's bedroom. Maximus gave him the apple to eat and the Grand King was instantly re-

stored to health. Overwhelmed and deeply grateful he presented each of the three with a big gold cup, encrusted with emeralds and rubies. But one of the cups he filled to the brim with precious pearls. Now here is the riddle. To which of the three magicians did he give the cup filled with pearls—and why?”

Silence. Libanius looked from one face to another.

“Well—no one? Gregory?”

“The Grand King should not have rewarded any of the three—magic is an illusion of the infernal powers.”

“Theology has spoken,” smiled Libanius. “But not Logic. The Grand King’s views about magic are not under discussion—nor are yours, my Gregory. This is a logical problem. Hyperion?”

“He should have given the cup with the pearls to Iamblichus, Sir. For without the crystal the three would never have been aware of the King’s illness. Awareness is the basis of all achievement.”

“Philosophy has answered,” chuckled Libanius. “But again, not Logic. For awareness of the problem would have been entirely futile, had it not been for Ædesius’ flying carpet to get them there in time. And of what avail would have been the carpet without Maximus’ apple? What is your opinion, Oribasius?”

“My opinion is that there is no such crystal, no such carpet and—unfortunately—no such apple,” said the physician drily.

“Medicine,” grinned Libanius, “takes as usual an entirely materialistic view, and again, as usual, misses the point. Prince Julian?”

“The cup with the pearls belongs to Maximus,” said Julian with a wistful smile.

“But why?” asked Libanius. “Surely the merit of the three gifts is the same, and none is worth anything without the other two?”

“That is quite true, sir,” nodded Julian. “Except that Iamblichus still has his crystal and Ædesius still has his carpet—but Maximus has lost his apple—the Grand King has eaten it.”

“Logic has spoken,” cried Libanius above the applause of the hall. “And it shall be suitably rewarded. You all know that from time to time I ask you to make a speech on a particular theme entirely without preparation. And my themes are not easy ones—they are chosen in a special way.”

“True enough,” whispered Julian to Oribasius. “He always chooses an impossible angle to make things more difficult. We had to prosecute Prometheus for giving the fire to mor-

tals and to attack Alexander the Great for ruining both Orient and Occident—”

“To-day,” went on Libanius, “I want the rhetor to give us a eulogy about the *virtues* of the Emperor Nero. The rhetor is—Prince Julian.”

“He’s vindictive, you know,” whispered Julian. “I should have known better than to solve the riddle of the sphinx.”

“Now you’re in for it,” grinned Oribasius.

They all seemed to feel as he did, and as the slim young man ascended the rostrum with hasty ungraceful steps they applauded him mainly from a feeling of relief.

“Cast your mind back three centuries,” cried Libanius. “Nero has just died. Up to you it is to defend him against all accusations.”

Julian bowed. “My friends,” he began. “I’m speaking to you to-day about the greatest artist of all time—and the most tragic figure in history: Nero. Never has there been a man of richer gifts and never an artist so versatile. He was a singer—he was a dancer—he was a poet—he was an architect—he composed and he acted: there was no field of artistic or creative activity in which he did not excel. But Fate is more cruel to the best than to the average man. The Fate that afflicted Homer with blindness did something infinitely worse to Nero: it made him the ruler of the earth! My friends, consider the exquisite cruelty of Destiny: the man with the urge to sing had to listen to the croaking voices of daily petitioners; the man who longed to compose songs destined to excel the Song of Solomon, had to spend his time in examining the drainage plans for the Pontine marshes; the powerful dramatic actor had to keep his artistic temperament in steel fetters—for in his position to stamp his foot meant war and a hasty word the destruction of a nation. But the strongest creative desire in him was that of the architect—so strong was the divine urge that nothing could keep it down, not even the painful routine of emperorship. He *had* to build, and knowing that, the touching kindness of his mind conceived a plan worthy of a titanic soul; to build the good and the beautiful on the destruction of the bad and the ugly. My friends, many parts of Rome were in a frightful state in those days—there were slums, unfit for human use—let alone for the use of the inhabitants of the world’s capital; and Nero conceived the grandiose plan of destroying this shame and replacing every brick with marble. Can you imagine his feelings, when the slum dwellers rose in fury, shrieking that they wanted their verminous dwellings—that he who burnt them was a demon, a devil who should himself be burnt? Such was the outcry that arose while the Imperial

singer, cithara in hand, was composing an immortal ode on the destruction of Troy. Could anyone condemn him, if he had given the order to kill those ungrateful wretches? No! But did he give such an order? No, again! For all their selfishness they were Romans, children of his own nation, and he loved them, with the love of a father for a spoilt child. True, he was giving them marble for bricks—but then these children had been accustomed to their bricks—they wept for them—very well—he would divert the attention of his children, he would give them something to play with, until the marble buildings were ready. And, as they were incapable of seeing his higher aims in burning their houses, he condescended to adopting their own lower attitude and like a true father, he wept with his children. They were certain that only criminals could burn Rome. Very well then—he would help them to look for criminals. Now there were unfortunate and deluded people in Rome who were the enemies of all that made life worth living; all the pleasures appeared to them to be sins, they loathed joy and loved sadness; they hated life and adored death. In his divine goodness Nero saw that here was his opportunity of making everybody happy—the Roman people by giving them the criminals; the Christians by giving them the death they longed for! Ah, I may go further and say that those who regard Christianity as the only way to salvation, like friend Gregory, who looks at me as though he wanted to burn me as Nero burnt Rome: would Christianity have spread as quickly as it did, had it not been for the martyrs in the arena? Has not Nero done more for Christianity than any single Christian, except perhaps the Apostles?"

"He's going too far," whispered Gregory grimly. "He's going to get himself into trouble."

"Ah, but he killed his mother—' some ignorant people will say," resumed Julian. "And he killed his wife. But people who talk like that forget his motives. It is clear that an artist of such calibre cannot be measured with the same yardstick as an ordinary man. He killed his mother, because she was mad and tried to seduce him—was he going to commit the crime of *Œdipus*? No, but could he, the best of sons, deny any wish of his mother? No, again! Thus there was only one solution, to put her to death and thus make her divine."

Libanius chuckled and so did many of the audience. Julian went on. He spoke about Poppæa Sabina. It was true that Nero kicked her in the belly when she was in the last month of pregnancy—but she had been unfaithful to him with so many men that it was impossible even for her to say who was the father of the never-to-be-born child—

"To those who will insist that Nero was a monster—and

who certainly must admit that Poppæa was one too—to them I say: surely you must at least acknowledge that Nero did a good deed by putting both the monster and the monster's breed out of the way—but to those who are impartial and objective and who therefore believe that Nero was, if anything, a past master of virtue, I will say this: he was the supreme pontiff of the Roman faith; what then could his feelings be when discovering as he did that Poppæa Sabina had secretly embraced the Jewish faith? Was it not his duty as High Priest, to put her to death for what he was bound to regard as the most terrible heresy? Did he not act exactly in the same way as many venerable priests act in our so much more enlightened days—except of course that he was not afraid of doing his own kicking instead of having it done by some hired hooligan? You will agree with me, I'm sure, that this great man, this unique artist, is a tragic figure, who died like most of the classic heroes, misunderstood by the many—recognised and praised by those of understanding. . . .”

When Libanius with a beatific smile gave the sign they applauded.

The lecture hall was well filled, and not only with students and their friends. A young man went up to the chair and whispered into Libanius' ear. The philosopher nodded, rose, and with a graceful gesture commanded silence. “My friends and students,” he said, “I'm glad you agree with me that Prince Julian has solved an exceedingly difficult problem with an eloquence and profundity of thought worthy of the traditions of our school. Let no one forget that the orator's personal opinion may have nothing to do with his speech—and that the only object of such oration is to learn how to use one's brain. I may add that there are not many who cannot learn in that respect from the speaker we have just heard.”

Renewed applause, and an interchange of smiles between Libanius and Julian, who sauntered down the stairs to rejoin Oribasius.

“Well—how did you like it?” he asked eagerly. “Remember—I wasn't prepared for it—I didn't even know what I was going to speak about.”

“Do you want the truth?” asked the physician. “Because just in case you don't know: there is such a thing as the truth.”

“Of course,” laughed Julian. “Out with it!”

“Very well then, here it is,” said Oribasius. “I felt like vomiting.”

Julian bit his lip. “I really thought my diction was almost perfect,” he murmured. “I'm sorry if—”

"Oh damn the diction! I know nothing about the tricks of the talking trade, but of all the lying, twisting, mental somersaults I ever heard—"

To his astonishment Julian burst into a cheerful laugh.

"You *are* a barbarian, my good Oribasius."

"Honestly now," said the physician, "how much of all this nonsense do you really believe?"

Julian became serious. "Every word of it—*while* I was speaking. Nothing now."

Oribasius gave him a long searching stare: "I think you are a dangerous man, Prince Julian," he said. "One day something you only meant for the moment may cause great harm—perhaps to many people—certainly to yourself."

"Bah!—this is a school of rhetoric. You've got to talk and talk well. It sharpens your wits as one sharpens a stylus."

They were slowly moving towards the door where they found Libanius talking to a group of ladies. Julian had caught a glimpse of them while he was speaking—women are rarely seen in the lecture hall, but perhaps Libanius had had a special reason for admitting them. As he approached, he saw that the great philosopher's face was flushed—was it with excitement or embarrassment?—perhaps a little of both. "My star pupil," said Libanius. "I am unworthy of this occasion but I am proud to introduce royalty to royalty—Prince Julian to his cousin, Princess Helena—"

Oribasius, feeling very out of place, retreated a few steps, and watched amid the throng of gaping, murmuring students.

"Princess Helena—who is she?"

"Don't you know, Lykon? The Emperor's youngest sister—she's been living on her country estate near Corinth."

The Emperor's youngest sister, thought Oribasius. Julian's cousin. He saw a tall girl, of twenty-one or two, with the face of Athena Parthenos, the immaculate, haughty goddess of virginity.

Oh, Pheidias, he thought. What wouldn't you have given to stand here in my place—not so sure that it isn't a statue, really—it's simply not possible that this is alive—it just shouldn't be allowed. . . .

The young goddess, however, didn't seem to be in a very gracious mood. The perfect mouth voiced only cold compliments.

Libanius fawned on her, his face wrinkled with servile enthusiasm—the crowd, idiotic and bewildered, stood gaping their admiration.

Oribasius couldn't see Julian's face, he only saw the princess' cold nod just before she turned to leave. The light

blue of her dress seemed to merge into the darker blue of her voluminous lady-in-waiting . . . and suddenly the world was empty.

Julian turned round and the physician saw his face, flushed and oddly changed—

The vision had caught him too, thought Oribasius. If only I could believe in a god—this is the moment when I should like to pray; to make me forget what I have seen, to blot it out of my memory, so that I could go on enjoying life as I have always done. . . .

They were walking side by side now, through doors and down steps, along a street full of traffic and bustling crowds.

"I always thought music was sound," said Julian. "But now I know that it can be movement too—"

I wish he'd stop being so clever, thought Oribasius bitterly; but he knew that he was wrong and that his bitterness was due to something else.

"She was not exactly gracious," went on Julian. "She didn't like it—I wish—"

"Nature is a poor sculptor," said the physician hoarsely, looking about. "I've never seen so many ugly people in my life."

Julian looked at him and understood. "People are always ugly," he replied. "Only goddesses are beautiful—but they never love human beings—except in fairy tales."

I'll get roaring drunk to-night, thought Oribasius. And to-morrow night—and the night after.

"I understand now why she's been kept away from the Court most of the time," said Julian. "Remember the story of that statue a young sculptor made in Rhodes, four centuries ago? Artemis in the arms of Endymion? The council of the island had to banish both sculptor and statue; such was Artemis' beauty that it was driving the young men of Rhodes to insanity and suicide. I used to laugh at that story—"

"Well—there's an Endymion for every Artemis," said Oribasius almost rudely.

"Unlike the legend, the Endymion of this Artemis is not a shepherd, my friend—" Julian shook his head.

And not a physician either, thought Oribasius, hating himself for thinking it.

"—he's a king," said Julian. "A very great king—the Grand King, in fact."

Oribasius stood stock-still in the middle of the street.

"What? Sapor? Is she going to marry that old—monster?"

Julian nodded. "There have been rumours about it for some time. She's going to Milan now, to meet the Emperor

—he's on his way there himself, from Mursa. It was a great victory—Magnentius is finished, although he did escape with his life. But what losses! Fifty-four thousand men fell in that battle, you know—the Emperor lost thirty thousand and Magnentius twenty-four. Fifty-four thousand men! Almost half of the two opposing armies! Enough men to defend our entire northern frontier—quite irreplaceable.”

Oribasius gazed at him in amazement. “How d’you know all that? I didn’t see you down at the port when the *Narbonensis* arrived there with the news.”

“I wasn’t there,” was the curt answer. “It wasn’t a very interesting battle, strategically. I wonder who was in command on our side, because—well, anyway, it was decided by our heavy cavalry. They made a feint against the left and then a strong attack against Magnentius’ right flank—giving an opening to the light cavalry. When Magnentius’ lines broke, the archers did the rest. Rather crude tactics. If it hadn’t been for the river Drave behind Magnentius’ lines, he might have saved the better part of his army—it was almost dark at the decisive moment. Frightful mistake to fight a battle with a swollen river just behind your lines. Can’t understand why Magnentius did it—and he was supposed to be a first-rate man.”

“You’ve studied military science, then, Prince Julian?” asked the astonished physician.

“I? Certainly not. I’m only using simple common sense. Would you have challenged me to a wrestling match, with a river directly behind you? It’s just asking me to throw you into it, isn’t it? What is so scientific about that?”

“I don’t know,” answered Oribasius thoughtfully. “But it seems to me that there are two Julians—the one in the lecture hall, talking his head off—and another one who—mmm—you served in the army for a year or two, though didn’t you?”

“Ye gods no—what on earth for? It’s the last thing I’d want to do. Didn’t you hear what Libanius said about butchers in uniform?”

“Oh, yes, quite,” admitted Oribasius drily. “But then I suppose it depends upon what you mean by butcher in uniform and it depends even more on whether he really meant it and on whether you really meant it either—”

Julian laughed. “You’re a delightful person, Oribasius. Libanius does sound a bit involved at times, doesn’t he?”

“I must say, I felt rather sorry you didn’t contradict him then and there,” confessed the physician.

“Why, my friend?”

“Oh, I don’t know—I’m a little old-fashioned, I suppose. I believe in the Empire and I have a natural respect

for breeding and nobility—with its obligations as well as its privileges.”

“And so you hoped I’d tell Libanius that an Imperial Prince couldn’t very well share his views over the results of a battle between his cousin, the Emperor, and a usurper,” concluded Julian. “Nor could he, my Oribasius. . . . He couldn’t afford to. But to be interested and to show interest may be two different things, you know . . . and young Corax is in the pay of the First Chamberlain—”

“What?”

“Oh, Eusebius has an excellent secret service—better than the Emperor’s. No, it wouldn’t have been any good to show much interest in political or military matters—let alone to show how one felt about it. It’s a great victory for Constantius, of course—but the Empire has lost a great army that was badly needed against Persia—fifty-four thousand men! Do you understand now, why Princess Helena is going to Milan? She is the Emperor’s sacrifice for the death of the fifty-four thousand—marrying her to Sapor means peace on the Persian frontier.”

“By old Asclepius and his beard,” said Oribasius grudgingly. “They’ve taught you to think after all.”

Julian gave a mirthless laugh. “A great victory,” he repeated. “A wonderful victory. To-morrow, when the news will be officially out, they’ll have prayers of thanksgiving in all the churches—and the most wonderful woman in the world will be sacrificed to the Persian Overlord, so that the brave old Roman Empire may go on sleeping peacefully. Remember the Minotaur of Crete, to whom they sacrificed the most beautiful virgins every year? She’s lost. And, for all I know—so am I.”

Oribasius stopped and looked up in bewilderment. “So are you?” he frowned. “What do you mean?”

“Oh, nothing. You’re quite right. I’m talking far too much—”

For a while they walked in silence through the cheerful, noisy streets.

“I don’t understand it,” grumbled Oribasius. “Why should *you* be in danger?—But I understand this much at least: you can’t talk about it. If our precious Corax is a spy—the slimy little worm—why shouldn’t I be?”

“You’re not a spy,” smiled Julian. “You’re not clever enough.”

Oribasius grinned. “Doubtful compliment, isn’t it?”

“I mean you’re not a clever enough actor. You see, you are a very straightforward person—very frank—and sometimes downright rude. You took full advantage of the open-

ing I gave you in our wrestling match—you didn't let me win, in order to flatter my vanity. Now, that *might* be the attitude of a very dangerous man; but you're not clever enough to play the part."

"I couldn't be bothered," said Oribasius gruffly.

"Exactly . . . Why do you think Libanius came to the palæstra this afternoon?"

"I have no idea—but he sang your praises as though he'd been paid for it."

"He knew of the arrival of Princess Helena; he asked her to come to the lecture hall."

"To introduce the royalties to each other—"

"And to learn, if possible, what plans the Emperor has for me. But there's more to it than that. I'll wager. Still—he's a very great man in his own way—you underestimate him a little. I fear. Don't you believe in the human intellect, Oribasius?"

"Not when it's performing acrobatics, Prince Julian."

"Incorrigible," laughed Julian. "I like you, Oribasius. Come and have dinner with me to-morrow, will you? At sunset—that is, just a little after sunset, shall we say? Goodbye, Oribasius."

He slipped away so quickly that the physician said goodbye to an empty street.

"I say, Oribasius—" It was Corax, beautifully dressed as usual, and in perfect taste. He was exquisitely perfumed. "You're in favour with our young Prince, aren't you? Why was he so upset?"

"He wasn't," replied the physician blandly. "But I am."

"Really?" The young Thracian raised his well-kept eyebrows. "I thought you were so tough? What can he have said to upset you?"

"He? Nothing. I've got the bellyache, that's all."

Corax was thick-skinned. "Perhaps you had better go and see a physician," he suggested.

"I don't like you," said Oribasius pleasantly. "Go away."

Corax looked at him, and seeing that he meant it, shrugged his slim shoulders and walked away, giggling.

CHAPTER XVII

From the window of his study Julian could see the Acropolis and that was why he had taken the villa. Three slaves did all the household work: a cook, a kitchenboy and

a personal valet. "Only upstarts need more servants—except for those in official positions," he used to explain to his friends, rather enjoying the consternation of many of them. The scions of wealthy families could not conceive a household of less than thirty or even fifty slaves. What he did not usually add was that one could be fairly sure of the integrity of three—but not of fifty, out of which at least one might easily be planted on him by the professional informers of the Imperial Court—Paul, or Mercurius, or even Eusebius himself.

Oribasius had a healthy appetite and he enjoyed a simply cooked meal. He had expected an elaborate dinner, a dozen or more guests and the most modern brand of flippancy in conversation; and he had made up his mind he was not going to like it. Instead, there were four well-cooked courses, two different kinds of wine—and he was the only guest.

He really must like me, he thought and felt pleased and even a little proud. Well, why shouldn't he? I like him too, he thought, frowning at his own vanity. But Julian had grown in his estimation during their last discussion—and, after all, he was a cousin of the Emperor.

The people of Athens were democratic, and if anyone was talked about here, it was usually a popular rhetor, a philosopher, or a lovely courtesan. Still—the young Prince was widely known and widely liked.

They discussed Libanius' latest book and the chances for the next chariot race; and Corax, whose sudden appearance and behaviour had so quickly confirmed what Julian thought about him.

Now Callias, the valet, was carrying the plates and dishes away.

"Leave the wine and goblets, Callias—and don't bring in the lamp yet—don't bring it in at all. It's the night before full moon—the heavens provide us with light enough. We needn't show our inadequacy by opposing them with the dim glow of a little burning oil."

"Your wine is excellent," said Oribasius, drinking. "But you don't drink it, it seems."

"Never more than one goblet at a meal," smiled Julian. "I've made it a rule."

"Yes, I've heard about that—and also—"

"Also what?"

"—that no one can accuse you of any vice without telling a lie."

His host laughed. "You must have taken a course in Court manners since we last met, my Oribasius."

"I shall always say what I think," replied the young

physician quietly. "Most young men of your age are seen going about with women— I'm not talking about Corax and the likes of him, of course."

"Women," said Julian pensively. "Has it ever occurred to you, Oribasius, that whenever a man says 'woman,' he means something very wonderful and pure and gentle and sweet—and whenever he says 'women' he means the opposite?"

"Write it down, before you forget it," nodded the physician. "Libanius will praise you for it— Mind you—you may be right; though I wouldn't be so sure."

"Woman," said Julian, with his eyes on the starry sky. "Not women."

"Well—I can see you're in for a great disappointment—or for complete happiness," mused Oribasius. "Or both—perhaps."

"I hate men who regard women as good fun," said Julian, still looking in the same direction. "I hate them even more than the women who are degraded enough—"

He shook his head as though to free himself of a tormenting memory.

"I wonder how my brother feels to-night?" he said.

How his mind does jump about, thought the physician. But then, he *is* very young. When I was twenty-four, eight years ago now—

"He isn't much of a statesman," went on Julian. "So perhaps he won't be so worried—"

"And why should he be worried! A man in his position—"

"His position is due to the fact that the Emperor had to fight Magnentius. He had not enough time to concentrate on the East—he was too busy. Now Magnentius is finished and Constantius has plenty of time."

Oribasius was going to ask, "What sort of a man is Prince Gallus?" But Julian was speaking again. "I've heard very little from Antioch—he's made Antioch his seat of government, and you probably know. But what I've heard isn't too good—he's an impulsive man and he's married to an ambitious woman—that is, to a woman who would be ambitious if her other vices would let her."

"Do you write to each other regularly?"

Julian turned round sharply. "Why do you ask that?" Then, smiling apologetically: "I'm sorry, Oribasius—it's a bad habit to be so suspicious; I assure you it's an acquired one—it's not natural to me. No, we don't write regularly. We have very little in common. His last letter came four months ago; he was asking me rather sternly to show more zeal in religious matters. There were rumours that I didn't go to church very often—"

"That's too bad," smiled Oribasius.

"It's true, though," nodded his host. "I only go when I must."

"That's where the little people are luckier," grinned the physician. "I never go—and no one cares."

Julian nodded. "I wonder what you believe in?" he said.

"I? Nothing."

"You mean nothing in the Socratic sense, of course. He said he knew that he knew nothing, but in saying so he was wiser than all those who pretend to know something and don't."

"Exactly. I'm sorry for all these people who try so hard to have the only true conception of their god. I can't help thinking that if there were a god—"

"There is, Oribasius. There must be."

"—and if he really wanted us to know and worship him, it would be so very simple for him to come out and proclaim himself: here I am, and this and that is what I want you to do for me. But does he? Not at all. He just stays mum and lets the poor fools quarrel about him until they are black in the face."

"Well, the Christians say he did exactly what you ask of him," smiled Julian.

"Ah, but Christ didn't appear as a god—he appeared as a human being, and not even a powerful one. So they did what they would do: mocked him and flogged him and finally killed him for being a blasphemer. Why didn't he come in his glory for all to see?—and not only for a dozen easily duped simpletons in Galilee—"

"Not only the simpletons are easily duped, Oribasius. In fact, it may be easier to dupe intellectuals."

"No, no," the physician filled his goblet. "If there is a god and he really cares for human worship—I personally can't understand why he should, being perfect and completely happy—then all he needs to do is to show himself once a year to every human being—just like the Spring. Everybody believes in the Spring and everybody loves it—except those who suffer from hay fever."

"Well," laughed Julian, "it's certainly a point of view, I grant you that. But it's begging the question all the same."

"Not in the least," the physician was becoming quite emphatic after his fourth goblet. "I've studied medicine, the science of the human body. I have seen thousands of bodies, inside and out; and I've never yet found any organ that could be regarded as the seat of the soul which they all jabber about. Where is it? Show it to me!"

"Someone's asked something like that before," thought Julian. "Who was it? Oh, yes—Thomas——"

"You can't," pursued Oribasius. "So perhaps there is no such thing. To me there can't be until it's proved."

"And yet, there is an urge, Oribasius—an urge in every human being, to search for a god."

"Granted there is. But why? Because human beings know that they have limitations, doubts, shortcomings, faults—and they will look out for somebody to tell them what to do. In childhood it's the father—later it may be a great man who provides them with an example—a great general or a great teacher—it depends upon the man's inclinations. They're searching for someone to replace the father of their childhood—the older, wiser one, whose word is the final law and to whom one can take all one's troubles. But they feel that this is only a link in a chain and that the chain should go further; everyone needs someone to whom they can look up; so they create for themselves someone to look up to and they call him god."

He paused.

"Go on," said Julian. "You're quite wrong—but go on all the same."

"I'll prove what I say," insisted Oribasius. "They'll make themselves a god who is a glorified image of themselves. Now I'm a Greek. We Greeks are a light-hearted, full-blooded race—we love life—and so do our gods—or did, I should say—as they don't exist any longer."

"You're quite wrong," repeated Julian, even more seriously than before.

"Look at the Jews," said Oribasius. "Isn't their Jehovah a Super-Jew? Proud, jealous, hot-tempered, intolerant, vindictive—but a generous Giver as well when he feels like it? Somewhere in the Bible it says that God created man in His own image. I believe that the sandal is really on the other foot: we create our gods in our own image—and we pray to our own good qualities in him."

"My poor Oribasius," said Julian. "And you can live without belief? Without purpose? What do you live for? What do you expect from life?"

"I have a very good time, thank you very much," said the physician cheerfully. "I enjoy beauty—and health—and nature—I can even enjoy the stupidity of man. They're like cubs, sometimes. Yes, I like men, really. I like to help them, because it does them good and me too—quite without any thought of the hundredfold interest in some glorified kingdom in the clouds; whether you call it heaven or elysium or par-

adise; but if there *were* such a thing as heaven, I suppose I'd prefer the pagan conception of it— I never cared much for harps, and the idea of flying about, with or without wings, makes me feel giddy. But I've talked enough of my own beliefs, or rather of my unbeliefs. What about you, Prince Julian? But I suppose, I'd better not ask."

"Why not?"

"Well—as I said—we little people are often luckier—not so—exposed. My father—bless his soul—was a simple farmer—"

"Did I hear you say 'bless his soul'?" interposed Julian innocently. "I thought there was no organ for such a thing."

"Oh—well—" Oribasius shifted a little in his seat. "It's only a manner of speaking. And he was a very fine man, you know, and wise in his own way. I suppose it's the close contact with nature that does it. We city people are cut off, in a way. I often think of him—sometimes I find myself talking to him in my thoughts, as though he were still alive—"

"So your father is still your god, Oribasius," said Julian very gently. "and you pray to him."

Oribasius began to laugh. "I never looked at it quite that way."

"That I can well believe," Julian was again looking at the sky outside.

The moon was well up now—one could see the silver disc above the acacias, over there, towards Eleusis. An owl began to hoot. Athena's sacred bird . . .

This Oribasius here, with his big round eyes and sharp nose, so unlike a Greck—he was a bit like an owl. Intelligent in his own way—and decent—and very likely a good friend to his friends.

He had made a few enquiries about him—there was no connection between him and the Court; he was just an ambitious young physician with an astonishingly big practice—though mostly among the poorer people, who seemed to like him and to swear by him. There was, in all probability, no harm in talking to him—more freely.

"Do you know why I invited you here after sunset, Oribasius?"

The young physician was pouring himself out another goblet. "I think I do, Prince Julian—and I think I know why you didn't even drink the one goblet of wine which you usually allow yourself. You only sipped at it. And you didn't have any meat—just a few prawns and vegetables."

"Observant, aren't you?" There was still a tinge of the old suspicion in his host's voice.

"A physician must be, if he is to be any good. Mind you, it only confirms what people are always whispering—your brother in Antioch may have heard of it, too—you have leanings towards the old religious ideas, haven't you, Prince Julian? And why not! You're a bit of a romantic, and I suppose there is more poetry in the old beliefs. You probably sacrificed to Eos at sunset—and maybe you're going in for some ceremony of purification—don't tell me—I don't want to know. It's entirely your affair, and the less people know—for certain, I mean—the better, things being as they are." He chuckled. "I can't very well ask you to believe that my father is a god," he added with a twinkle in his eye. "He's my own, very personal one—but what *would* interest me is to know how a man of your intellect can figure things out the way you seem to. You—and a philandering gentleman named Zeus or Jupiter—and his good lady, as jealous as the god of the Jews and a bit of a dragon at that—and their entire family, boys and girls, with all our own virtues and failings—and a basinful of quarter-, half-, and three-quarter gods, one for every bit of landscape, one for every forest, every tree even—all that: and the man who has studied Plato and Aristotle, and who, incidentally, understands them—which is more than I can say. It doesn't seem to make sense and that's why, I confess, I'm rather curious."

"So was I—for a time," admitted Julian good-naturedly. "There was a short period when I reproached myself for wishful thinking—for wishing that the old gods did exist because of the poetic beauty of the idea. But that period didn't last long. We have very different natures, Oribasius—perhaps that is why we like each other, as I feel we do—"

The physician nodded, his eyes downcast. Emotional issues always made him feel a little embarrassed.

"I'm the more complex one, if you'll forgive me saying so," added Julian.

"Nothing to forgive," grumbled Oribasius. "There's no particular advantage in complexity."

"You see—what you're saying is, more or less, 'I don't know whether there's a god or not and if there is, I don't really think he cares whether I know about him or not. Of all the mysteries, I'm only interested in those of the human body—'"

"I'm not interested in any mysteries—my aim is to bring abnormality—all illness is an abnormality of sorts—back to normality. Sometimes I even succeed."

"All right then—but I'm different. I can't help yearning to find out the truth. I always did try to find the truth. I learnt

about Christianity in a monastery— I was there for ten years.”

Oribasius whistled through his teeth. “I see,” he said.

“I was very young then—,” Julian made a slight, but very eloquently condescending gesture—“and I just swallowed everything I was told. Then a very great man came into my life and opened my eyes. His name doesn’t matter, but he was—and is—a very great man; he made me think, really think. I owe that to him—and I shall never forget it. His own leanings were decidedly towards the gods of old—he regarded Christianity as a corrupt influence, both on the State and on the individual. But although he could destroy the faith I had in the story of the man of Galilee, he could not really build up my faith in accordance with his own views. Voraciously I swallowed what philosophical teachings I could find; Plotinus and Porphyry and even Origen—despite his pro-Christianism: the teachings of Marcus Aurelius—there’s a fine man for you, Oribasius, you should try him some day—and countless others. They all seem to have some part of the truth in them, but not the whole truth. My greatest desire was to get to Athens—to the place where the best brains of our time are to be found; and above all, Libanius. My wish was fulfilled. The Emperor allowed me to come here and was good enough to supply me with ample funds—far more than I need.”

“The family of Julius Constantius was always wealthy, I thought,” said Oribasius.

“Oh, yes—but that wealth was confiscated by the Emperor, when my father—died.”

There seemed to be no bitterness in the young man’s voice—just the slightest hesitation before the last word indicated the tragedy of his early life.

“Now I have been in Athens almost four years,” he continued calmly, “and I have learnt many things; but perhaps the most important of them all is the cognition that you cannot find the truth—the whole of the truth—with your intellect alone.”

“Our intellect isn’t strong enough,” agreed Oribasius.

“No—it isn’t that at all. Were I a hundred times more intelligent than I am, it still wouldn’t suffice. The reason is simple: the truth, as a whole, is not a matter of the intellect alone. The intellect can only do the sifting, the analysing and criticising part of it. But for actual cognition it is as unsuitable as a fish hook would be for a lute string.”

Oribasius listened with interest. “And what is the lute string?”

"Revelation," said Julian solemnly. "And I don't mean the Christian book so called," he added quickly. "I mean divine revelation—the direct transmission of cognition from the godhead to mankind. Oh, I know that it isn't easy to grasp, my friend—Libanius for instance, who is all intellect, could never grasp it. He feels that I am sliding away from him, and I think he even feels in what direction I am moving; that is why he turned up at the Palæstra the other day—to win me back. He tries hard to keep me within his own realm; the realm of cool, white, logical reason; Mercury's kingdom."

"I remember dimly," agreed Oribasius. "He was the god of reason—and of travellers too—a queer mixture, I always thought."

"Not so queer," smiled Julian. "He is the divine element of *distance*—both mental and material: he is the bridge, the road between oneself and the other fellow—by thought—by word of mouth—and by the written word—and also through travel. It was his influence that made the first men exchange signs—noises first, grunts and bellowings, very much like animals—but gradually he revealed to him the articulation of sound—the first words, intelligible words. The first man, when in danger, uttered piercing shrieks, whose very urgency proclaimed the danger which they expressed. But then a word was found for danger—a word that could be uttered quietly, without raising the voice, and yet submitting the right meaning. Mercury is the swiftest of the divine forces—"

"Yes, I remember—he had wings on his sandals."

"Yes—symbolic wings, of course. I can travel in thought from here to the Persian frontier and back within the space of a heartbeat, can't I? Maybe the time will come when Mercury will teach us more—when he will teach us how a man on the Persian frontier can catch the thoughts of a man in Athens, and be understood; and how to send his answer back in the same way."

"Why not teach us how to fly?" cried Oribasius. "Why not make us fly as quickly as the sound—anything is possible as soon as you dismiss reason."

"But I am not dismissing reason," argued Julian. "I'm only giving it its proper place, as one of the factors of human potentialities. There is more than one, you must admit that. That is one of the reasons why you need more than one god. . . ."

"I don't need any god," insisted Oribasius. "And I'm blessed if I know why a god should need me!"

"It's quite simple, really," protested Julian. "There can't be only one god—I can prove that much at least by simple logic."

"Now that does make me curious." Oribasius grinned. "How are you going to prove that?"

"Look—there is one thing about which every creed agrees—and it's an astounding thing too. They all agree that God is *good*."

"True."

"Well then, if there is only one God—how could evil ever come into the world? Surely a good Being—an entirely good Being, and a Being that is perfect—could not possibly create evil! And if you tell me that he didn't—who then did create it? Destruction—putrefaction—cruelty—where do they originate? From the one good and perfect Being? Impossible. So there is only one solution: there must be more than one creative power and therefore more than one god."

"There is another solution—that there is none at all."

"If there weren't," said a gentle voice, "how could you have doubts about him? The very fact that you think about a god already proves his existence. Thoughts are creative."

They stared at the tall dark shadow in the doorway.

But already a light was shining behind him and Callias came in with a lamp, pushing his way past the stranger and mumbling apologies.

From these they understood that the stranger had entered the anteroom and had given his name; that he, Callias, had asked him to wait and gone to fetch the lamp, so as to have a closer look at him—before deciding whether he would disturb the Prince for his sake—but that in the meantime the stranger must have gone on; and that he, Callias, was very sorry.

They understood it, although they scarcely listened; their eyes and their attention were fixed on the stranger himself.

For a moment, when Callias passed him with his lamp, his face had been clearly visible, a long pale face with bloodless lips and strangely clear, piercing eyes. He could not have been more than forty-five or forty-six, but his hair was white. He was simply dressed in travelling clothes which showed good taste and somehow both Julian and Oribasius knew immediately that he had come a long way.

"My name is Chrysanthios," said the stranger with the soft accent of an Island Greek. "I apologise for this intrusion, but I heard you mention Mercury and it attracted me. It is not the slave's fault—I alone am to blame. I have been sent here by my master, Maximus of Ephesus—"

"I knew it," murmured Julian, his eyes gleaming. "Take a seat, friend Chrysanthios—Callias, another goblet."

"It is not necessary." The stranger smiled. "I will use yours,

if you will allow me that favour—as you are not likely to use it yourself.”

Oribasius' eyes widened. If Callias had spoken the truth, the stranger could not have been in the house more than a few minutes—how could he then know that Julian would not drink? It was almost a quarter of an hour ago since they had been talking about it.

But already Julian had pushed his goblet in front of Chrysanthios.

“This is my friend Oribasius,” he said. “My *trusted* friend.”

“Of course,” said the stranger, bowing slightly, before he sat down. “I shall not keep you long,” he added. “I’m here as a messenger only: I bring you the greetings of Maximus.”

“He knows of me?”

Chrysanthios smiled as though Julian were jesting. “This is his message,” he said. “The time has come for Achilles to recognise his greatness. At present he is undergoing the initiation at Eleusis—”

Julian twitched instinctively.

“—but the Lesser Mysteries will not suffice. Only in the sacred caves of Ephesus can he learn what he needs to learn in order to reach his goal—the whole truth. He is expected in Ephesus by the next ship.”

“Achilles?” murmured Julian.

The stranger lifted his silver goblet, holding it in front of him so that the moonlight played on it. And not till then did he drink. When he had emptied it he rose.

“I bid you good night, Prince Julian—and you, Oribasius.”

“You are not going already?” asked Julian. “Stay—I have a hundred things to ask you—”

“I cannot answer them,” smiled Chrysanthios. “But Maximus will. Good night—Achilles.”

Quietly he walked out of the room. The two friends looked at each other in silence.

“I can’t have drunk as much as all that,” murmured the physician. “So I suppose it was real.”

“What is reality?” asked Julian softly. “Is anything real?”

“I’m real, all right,” growled Oribasius. “I can guarantee that. But I’m not so sure about *him*—” and he nodded his head towards the door. “Also I’m beginning to get seriously worried about you—yes, I mean it. I don’t know what you’re up to, but it seems to me that you’re getting mixed up with very queer people. None of my business, I know. But I don’t like it all the same.”

“You have heard of Maximus, I take it?”

“Oh yes—everybody has. That’s what I’m driving at. The

greatest of all quacks—his father was the Delphic oracle and his mother the Witch of Endor! He makes secret potions and foretells when the Grand King of Persia is going to sneeze. What on earth have you got in common with that sort of spiritual juggler?"

"Oribasius, my friend," said Julian indulgently, "did you hear Chrysanthios deliver the message?"

"Certainly—I tell you I'm not drunk—yet."

"Then you heard him mention that Achilles was going through an initiation in Eleusis?"

"Yes—I did hear that bit of nonsense."

"Oribasius—I have been initiated in the Eleusinian Mysteries—and no one knows about it except the priest—and he has only known it three days. How did Maximus know—in Ephesus?"

Oribasius gulped. He thought. Thought again.

"There's a trick here somewhere," he said. His face lit up. "I've got it," he cried. "Maximus doesn't know it at all. Of course he doesn't. But Chrysanthios does. We don't know when he arrived in Athens, do we? He may have been here three days—and why shouldn't he know the priest in Eleusis? I bet you he does. Those people are always hobnobbing together. It's the simplest trick in the world. He just added that sentence to his message. Most impressive."

"One could easily find out when Chrysanthios arrived," said Julian. "The Archon at the Peiræus would tell you—ask him. After all, it's his business to know who arrives at the port."

The physician shook his head. "You were certainly right about one thing," he remarked drily. "It isn't only the simple people from Galilee who can be so easily duped—"

Callias reappeared in the doorway. "A courier from Byzantium, Sir, with a letter to be delivered personally."

"Show him in."

"Yes, Sir."

The messenger was an old Greek slave with an intelligent face.

"From my Master, Mardonius," he said, extracting a tiny roll from his belt and giving it to Julian.

"Thank you. Callias! Give this man some food and put him up for the night."

Julian looked at the seal. It was intact. He cut the strings, unrolled the letter and read.

Oribasius watched him grow pale.

When he looked up, he said: "This is from my greatest friend; for years he has been trying to find out whether—to find out what happened to my mother—but without success."

He knows I am interested in any detail, even the smallest, about her. He has found the physician who was with her when I was born; he is a very old man now—well over eighty—yet he remembers well the time of my birth. He said that my mother told him more than once of a strange dream she had the night before I was born. . . .”

“Yes?” asked Oribasius, relieved that there was obviously no really bad news in the letter.

Julian rose. “She dreamed that she was giving birth to Achilles,” he said slowly.

There was a heavy silence.

Julian smiled—a radiant smile that made his face almost beautiful.

“I’m going to Ephesus—by the next ship,” he said.

CHAPTER XVIII

“Flavius Claudius Julianus to Mardonius, Member of the Imperial Council, the greetings of all good gods and all his affection.

“If you are well—so am I.

“It is now almost eight months since I decided, overnight, to leave Athens for Ephesus, city of real wisdom, the immortal seat of eternal Artemis. And for all this time I have lived in the hospitable house of a man whom it is difficult not to call a demi-god.

“Truly, Maximus bears his name rightly; he is the greatest, by far, of all the teachers I have met. You will forgive me for this eulogy, I am sure; believe me, I know how much I owe to you, the man who brought light into my life, when all was dark; the light-bringer—Lucifer—is it not typical that the disciples of the Galilean should regard him as an evil principle; as the devil himself? But then, of course, there can be nothing they fear as much as the man who brings light into the sad muddle of their minds.

“But I was going to tell you about Maximus of Ephesus. He is about sixty years old, rather less than more: but in wisdom he combines the accumulated force of six thousand years of human thought. With him there are no limitations, and his mere presence radiates light as it is with those whom the gods love. It was the proudest moment of my life, when he told me—only recently—that I had become his best pupil—the best he had ever had.

“I am writing to you on the morning of the great day—the day of my final initiation into the Brotherhood of Hermes.

Rejoice, my Mardonius: I have decided to consecrate my life to the gods. I know it is what you have always hoped for—although I felt sometimes that we did not agree about my final goal. You seemed to think of me as the man destined to abolish the doctrine of the Galilean and to reintroduce the worship of the gods. But, my dear friend, I am not that man, and if, as you say, my horoscope forecasts any such inclination, I must seriously doubt, not the wisdom of the stars, but of the interpreter.

"I need hardly tell you about how small, and even non-existent my chances are of ever getting into the position of supreme power. Constantius is still a youngish man—anyway, a man in the prime of life—for all I know he may survive me by many years. If he doesn't—there is Gallus. And what is more, if it is *not* Gallus, it is certainly not Julianus.

"Talking of Gallus—we hear very little, in Ephesus, of what is going on in Antioch; our interests are projected on things of a very different nature—but what little I hear is sad, to put it mildly. My poor brother has never had more than the most scanty education; fresh from army life he was made Cæsar; and the woman at his side has only the rank, and not the mind and heart of an Imperial princess. She is cruel and vicious and brings out all the worst in Gallus' nature. After only a few years of his rule people are saying that he is tyrannical and obstinate and that many have suffered wrong from him. I cannot understand this. Surely there must be a far greater satisfaction in doing good! I can conceive of a poor wretched being trying to avenge himself on his own fate by harming others—but a Cæsar!—with his immense opportunities of emulating the gods! I hear that the Emperor has sent messengers to him to exhort him about his conduct and it makes me feel deeply ashamed. Exhortations about better conduct—from Constantius! It would have been bad enough had they not been justified—but this makes it almost intolerable. Then I heard that Gallus is going or may even have gone to Byzantium, in order to preside over the Imperial games. This too worries me, as I have always understood that it is a prerogative of the Emperor to do so. Why must he leave his capital instead of doing his duty on the spot?

"Still, it is not my affair: but I doubt very much whether Gallus is still as much in favour as he was some years ago. Also, quite apart from the practical impossibilities, I have not the slightest wish of becoming the ruler of the world! The gods are my witnesses! It is not for lack of ambition, though; for my aim is a far higher one than the Imperial purple.

"It is the Empire *within* me over which I desire to rule. You will perhaps remember the letter in which I expressed

my awe and reverence about the message from Maximus, calling me 'Achilles'—just before your letter arrived, telling me about my mother's dream. I had accepted the omen—but in its spiritual meaning.

"I have no wish to club sense into the heads of ferocious Sarmatians or Persians; I want to put sense into my own head: and I am now doing so, my friend. I am learning, and there is no other place in the world so suitable for doing so.

"What joy it will be for me, one day, to let my two great friends meet: Mardonius and Maximus. In my Athenian days, I suppose, I should have been looking forward to it as a furious battle of wits, but it's no good trying to be witty with Maximus. He is deadly serious—without being deadly, as any lesser man inevitably would be.

"They are preparing the festival of Cybele, both in Ephesus and Pergamus—all in secret, of course, although the edicts of our pious Galilean Emperor are not as strictly observed here as they are in or near the capital. They are even having a procession of Corybantes in the neighbouring forest, I believe; which means that a lot of holy or rather unholy nonsense is going to take place, in honour, or rather dishonour, of the great Mother of Gods. Cybele, the Womb, the Archetypal Egg, from which all life was generated: how long will it be before mankind can understand that the cruel story of Cybele and Atys is neither fact nor fairy story, but a symbol of the separation of the soul from vice and error!

"Oh Mardonius, it has taken me a long time to understand the world; do not smile when you read this. I know I am still young, not yet twenty-five: but the greater part of my thinking, ever since I learnt to think—through you—has been spent on that question and only I know that the key to it all is myself, that in knowing myself I can know the world. When I know what my life means, I am bound to know what life means altogether; when I know what my death signifies, I shall have learnt the secret of all dying. And when I recognise the godhead in myself and know that what is divine in me can be reunited with the immortal Spirit, then—and only then—I shall have won the Empire within and with it my goal, the only one that is worth living for. My life may not be a long one—the grace of the gods has been abundant as it is only with those whom they call early to themselves. But when, in the beyond, I meet the spirit of my mother, I hope I shall be able to say: 'Like Achilles I have conquered, Mother; but unlike him, I have conquered myself.' "

Julian read the letter carefully, adding a little polish to its style here and there. Then he closed the roll and sealed it.

"Callias—"

The slave had been waiting for the call and came in instantly.

"Give this to Philon; he is travelling to Milan in a few days—in the *Narbonensis* to Athens and from there by land, I believe. Tell him, I shall be grateful if he will deliver the letter personally. I don't want it to go by State mail. Has our host come down or is he still asleep?"

"Here I am, Julian," said a deep voice.

"Maximus! You look upset—has anything happened?"

Callias slipped quietly out of the room.

"Something is just about to happen, my son," said the mystic. He was a tall man with aquiline features. His hair, though streaked with grey, was still ebony black, but his beard was white and the contest gave him a striking note. The eyes, under bushy brows, were usually sharp and piercing; but now it seemed to Julian as if there were an invisible curtain in front of them.

"What is going to happen, Maximus—that can upset *you*?"

"Ædesius is dying," said the mystic without moving his lips. "And he wishes to see you before he goes. We must go at once."

Ædesius, the greatest sage of the time, a man to whom even Maximus looked up—dying.

"But—he is in Pergamus?"

"He is here. In Sosipatra's house, on the hill."

"And he sent for me?"

"In the spirit—yes."

Julian nodded and followed Maximus without another word. He had by this time become used to clairvoyance, although he had never experienced it himself. There was a coach waiting for them in front of the house. The drive did not take long. From afar they saw a tall slim woman standing in the garden; she was dressed in white.

When the coach stopped: "I have been looking out for you," said the woman. Maximus bowed to her and so did Julian. There was no introduction, nor was there any need for it, although Julian had never met Sosipatra before. She was beautiful in a grave Junoesque way, and not much older than Julian.

"Chrysanthios is with him," she said, as they entered the house.

At the door of the room Julian hesitated, but Maximus nodded to him and he entered.

At first he saw only Chrysanthios, pale and shaken, standing at the back of a big armchair. Only then he became aware of the thin dark body in the chair, with its enormous head,

covered with thin wisps of white hair. It had sunk on his chest.

"I want to see him, Chrysanthios."

Ædesius' voice was surprisingly clear. With gentle hands, delicate as a woman's, Chrysanthios lifted the old head and held it. The heavy wrinkled lids opened with difficulty, revealing eyes the colour of amber.

"I wanted to see you, Julian, before I go home. You are the hope of times to come, but you must know: a genius is he who gives form to his time; and he must not give form by force. Only One has achieved that so far and He was more than a genius."

What does he mean, thought Julian. And why does he say that to me? But already the head in Chrysanthios' hands was speaking again.

"Always remember; the sun you see is not the sun, but only its image. Yet the sun is the highest. The man you see in a mirror is not the true man—but only his image. Yet he can become a god. As above, so below."

The amber eyes closed and Julian thought that his audience was at an end; but the voice spoke once more, still surprisingly clear.

"Right can do wrong, Julian. Have a care." Then softer: "Go in peace, my son."

Deeply moved, Julian bowed and went out of the room on tiptoe.

Maximus, awaiting him in the doorway, embraced him silently. Nodding to Sosipatra, who looked like a statue of grief, they left the house.

Neither of them spoke a word.

Two hours later they set out again from Maximus' house: "Our silence so far has been voluntary; but from the moment when we enter the caves we must not speak," said the mystic. "Do you feel ready, Julian?"

"I think so."

"Did you understand what Ædesius said?"

"N-not all of it. I'm afraid. But I cannot forget his words. I understood what he said about the sun being only an image. All the heavenly bodies we see are only images in a higher sense, although they are very real to us in the material world. Bodies! That word explains it fully. I can see my body in a mirror; but only a dim symbolic reflection of my true self, of the spirit in me . . . and even that only at times. The spirit is there all the same, of course, and so it is also with the heavenly bodies: we cannot see their true selves, their

spirits: we cannot see the gods, because we cannot see man. That is what they meant in the book of the Jews, when they write about God creating man in his own image. But they were not the first to find that out."

"As above, so below," nodded Maximus. "Thus says Hermes Trismegistus, he whom the Egyptians called Thoth and Plato Theuth. It is from the Egyptians that Moses learned most of what he knew. He too was an initiate; as Ædesius was—and as you will be."

"As Ædesius—was?"

"He died this very minute."

Julian bowed his head.

"To die is to be initiated," said Maximus. "Plato knew that too, as you realise."

The coach had left the outskirts of the town and the hooves of the horses clopped heavily uphill.

"It is the world of the spirit that is the true reality," thought Julian. "What we believed to be reality is only an image—and deceptive at that. We are not as we seem to be."

He felt that he had always known it, in a dim, blurred sort of way, and, with a shudder, he understood that this was an essential thing to know and that his initiation to-day would have been an empty ceremony without that knowledge.

Closing his eyes, he prayed for the immortal spirit of Ædesius—to the sun, the true sun, whose image was just now diving below the horizon.

The coach stopped.

"The caves," said Maximus huskily and he raised his finger to his lips.

They left the coach, and instantly the driver turned it round and drove off in a hurry. No common man stayed near these caves longer than necessary.

Maximus began to climb up a steep footpath and Julian followed silently. Soon they reached a small plateau, surrounded by huge rocks of a strange, reddish colour. Maximus, turning round, waited for Julian to come up to him; he then laid his left hand gently over the young man's forehead and with two fingers closed his eyelids, as one closes the eyelids of the dead. He then began to lead him, step by step, towards the secret entrance.

The same as Eleusis, Julian thought. Now I shall hear the rushing of wind and the noise of thunder and water will pour down on me, and beasts will snarl. Everyone knew that all this was produced by the hierodules, the slaves of the outer temple, but it was better to let the artificial elements take possession of one's emotions, and stir them up from their dull sleep. Only the trained initiate could transfer him-

self into the state of mind he desired. The man of high courage needs no stimulant, but the ordinary man does better if he drinks a goblet of wine to overcome his fears.

But there was no wind, no thunder and no rain.

There was just silence; the crunching of their sandals and the soft rustling of their robes were the only sounds. It seemed to have become cooler, though. "Now at last," thought Julian. At last the end of the wandering and wandering, the end of years of questing; the last year, especially, had been one unbroken chain of preparation for this moment. From ritual prayers at regular intervals, to the strictly measured and qualified ration of food and drink—set hours for sleep, set hours for meditation. Now was the harvest time. He did not know all that he was to expect, but he knew that in a few days, when he left the caves, another—a new—Julian would start a new life.

He could not hear Maximus' footsteps any more. He was alone.

It did not frighten him and he went on as before, still with his eyes closed.

Suddenly a clear young voice just behind him said mockingly: "Whither are you going, you fool! Look out!"

He paid no heed to it. Then a deep voice, that seemed to come from all sides at once, said: "There is no salvation without regeneration. You must die to be born."

And the same voice, a little later: "You must die—now!"

At the same moment his feet trod on nothing and he fell, fell into the void: his last thought was, clear and sober: "I am not afraid."

When he woke and opened his eyes, he was in complete darkness.

He was lying on rock, like that he had been walking on before he fell.

He felt curiously elated and happy and somehow he knew that he was in a friendly Presence. When the Voice spoke, it was only what he expected, and the words, too, were familiar to him.

"In the beginning there was, is and will be the One. It is from Him that all is derived. He is Unity. From the One comes Nous, from Nous comes Psyche. And also the Archetypes called Powers."

"I believe," said Julian. His voice sounded strange to him, as though it belonged to someone else.

"The Powers are gods," said the Voice. "The gods are Powers. Highest among them is the true Sun who is thy father and the father of all fathers."

"I believe," said Julian.

"In the world of the spirit the relation between Powers is spirit also," said the Voice. "The Sun's love of man is a divine spirit; the Sun's force is a divine spirit; the Sun's wisdom is a divine spirit. This is Aphrodite; this is Ares, this is Zeus."

"I believe," said Julian enthusiastically.

"All that is creative comes from the true Sun and is generated through Zeus," said the Voice. "All that is harmonious comes from the true Sun and is generated through Apollon. All that is life giving and healing comes from the true Sun and is generated through Asclepius. And generation itself is Aphrodite."

"I believe."

"Life is primal; death is transformation. Man is a spiritual child of the gods and is to become a god himself."

"How?"

The question was part of the ritual.

"Whosoever he willeth, that he is, that he can, that he doth."

"Who was not generated?"

"Helios."

"Who was not born?"

"Athena. She is wisdom that proceedeth not from the head of Zeus, but from the whole nature of Helios."

"Who am I?"

"The beloved of the gods, to become perfect through union. A child of earth and starry heaven, but thy race is of heaven."

"Who will lead me?"

"Hermes Trismegistus."

"Who art thou?"

"Hermes Trismegistus."

"When I know thee, Hermes, and thou knowest me, I shall be thou and thou shalt be I."

"Pray."

"Oh Lord, if it please Thee, announce me to the greatest God. I am a man, son of Julius Constantius and born of the mortal womb of Basilina, and of spermatic substance. This man, having been born again by Thee, out of so many myriads rendered immortal, in this hour, according to the good pleasure of God in His surpassing goodness, seeks to worship Thee and prays to Thee to the utmost of his human powers."

"So be it," said the Voice.

A faint light began to glow far away. Julian rose from his knees. The Voice had sounded very near him but there was no one to be seen in the great cave.

He began to walk in the direction of the light.

At the mouth of the cave Maximus was waiting. It was five days since he had led Julian to his destiny, and the ceremony was bound to come to an end at any moment. He knew it all—he had gone through it himself, more than a generation ago. The hymn to Hermes, the solemn words of name-giving. "Heliodor"—the gift of Helios—was to be Julian's name. It would never be pronounced after the nomination, but every letter written to another initiate had to be signed with it. The three nights alone, in meditation, in the centre cave, when the initiate is in union with the god; there was no Voice then, only the holy quiet of spirit's intercourse with spirit. And the final ceremony of thanksgiving for one more soul whose immortality as an individual had been secured.

Over there, in faraway India, they did not believe in individual survival; their aim was the final reunion of the individual soul with the All-Soul, of which Plato, too, had spoken. It was the dewdrop joining the ocean. There was nothing wrong with that either. Spiritual will was what mattered and if the individual will decided for self-abandonment in the godhead—well and good: then such was going to be its fate. But this could not often be the case with a man of the Western world; they willed their existence after death—and exist they would.

It was tiring to wait; far more tiring than to sit among the priests in the caves, as he had been doing these five days, meditating and praying. But he wanted to be the first upon whom Julian's eye fell when he came out. He loved that young man.

He is my son, he thought. Much more my son than Julius Constantius' son.

And now he was coming, young and erect and just a little pale from the experience of five days and five nights.

Maximus stood up and laid his hands on his shoulders.

Julian bowed. Silently they made their way down the footpath to the road, where the coach should be waiting—and there it was.

They approached it . . . and stopped in their tracks.

Three men were waiting with the coach; all three were officers; the one in the middle wore the insignia of a tribune.

"Flavius Claudius Julianus?"

"Yes."

"I am the Tribune Glabrio. I arrest you in the name of the Emperor on a charge of high treason."

PART THREE

A.D. 356-361

CHAPTER XIX

"The game's up," said Cherubaal wearily. "That is—it shouldn't be up, but it is."

Staggering, he fell into the chair Mardonius had pushed towards him. "Pull yourself together, man of the stars. What's happened?"

"Prince Gallus is dead."

Mardonius gave a low whistle.

"Dead . . . ?"

"Executed."

"By whom?"

"Eusebius."

"Of course, Eusebius. Where?"

"At Pola—in Istria, that is. Dirty little port."

"Who told you?"

"One of the First Chamberlain's slaves told Kamil. The little wretch has a talent for being told things—"

The Chaldean broke into a high nervous laugh.

"What's so funny?" asked Mardonius, frowning.

"Nothing—nothing at all. But it's exactly what so many people always say about *me*—the little wretch has a talent for being told things."

"Have some wine," ordered Mardonius, and he filled a goblet. "You look half dead."

"I am—" Cherubaal emptied the goblet with avidity. No wonder," he said, "I'm finished. Wouldn't be surprised if you are too. Eusebius has done it again. He's a master, that hell-hound, I will say that for him."

"Where is he now?"

"Resting in his suite. He will report in due course to the Emperor—to whom God and so on."

"Why not immediately? Has the Emperor refused to see him?"

"No such hope. The Emperor is at Mass—in the Arian basilica."

Mardonius nodded. "Very pious lately—ever since his

conversion to this new brand of Christianity." His brain was working feverishly.

"I can't understand your calm, Mardonius," groaned the little Chaldean. "Don't you see that this is stark calamity? Already I've heard that Eusebius is going to make the Emperor sign a new edict, forbidding entirely the practice of divination. I'm finished. Now that wouldn't be so bad—the gods have been good to me and I've had a pleasant life; I don't mind exile—and even if it came to the worst, I don't think I'd mind—much. But there's one thing, one thing that I can't bear—"

Large tears appeared in the little man's eyes. "It's wrong!" he gulped. "That's what I can't bear—it's wrong. By Astaroth's behind, I should know my own horoscope! But there's nothing in it—on the contrary—I've got good aspects! So it can't be a calamity! But it is! For forty years I've been studying my stars, and they've never lied to me—and now—now they do!"

He sobbed like a child.

Mardonius, awakening from his own thoughts, began to smile.

"Cherubaal—my old star-monger—I wish the whole Palace—no, the whole Empire could see you now—"

The little Chaldean sat up and wiped his eyes. "I know—the adviser of Emperors—the master of the stars—howling because his own horoscope has gone wrong—"

"No, Cherubaal, my old friend—it isn't that. Not at all. But what greater proof of a man's sincerity, of a man's true belief can there be than his despair when he seems to be proved wrong! Anyone seeing you now must understand that you have been faithful to your stars—"

"—until they became unfaithful to me," moaned the astrologer.

Mardonius leaned forward. "How do you know they have?" he whispered. "Nothing's happened to you yet. It's a dangerous situation, I grant you that—but is it hopeless?"

Cherubaal gazed at him in stupefaction. "But surely—Prince Gallus—it was my prediction that the Constantian Empire should prevail through its own strength that made the Emperor make him Cæsar—and now—"

"Now he started a rebellion, has been caught and executed. But did you *recommend Prince Gallus*?"

"No, of course not—I didn't even know he existed. But all the same, I put the idea into the Emperor's head."

"And the idea didn't work out successfully—that's true enough. But it isn't the fault of the idea—it's the way it was

treated that made it go wrong. Your stars didn't lie, Cherubaal—and out of defeat may come victory! But we must try to protect Prince Julian—or all is lost! Therefore you must go and see the Empress at once."

"No one will even announce me—now," stammered Cherubaal. "I'm already a leper with all the courtiers."

"I shall announce you myself," said Mardonius calmly. "I'm still a Member of the Imperial Council, although friend Eusebius very likely thinks that I'm as good as dead. But before we go—here are your instructions."

And he began to explain the astrologer's task in short, clipped sentences. Cherubaal listened with growing anxiety.

"The audacity of it," he stammered. "It's madness."

"Perhaps. But it's the only way."

Cherubaal hesitated. Then an idea seemed to strike him. "That chart," he said. "The younger brother's chart—you still have it?"

Mardonius, after a moment's hesitation, produced the sheet with the quaint figures and Cherubaal studied it with the intensity of a man reading his own fate. His little monkey-like face was twitching with nervousness.

"Strange—" he said, "he has been living in retirement all this time—and yet he is widely known and liked. . . ."

"He is," nodded Mardonius. "I have seen to that in my own way. Come, friend, don't let us lose any more time. You must go and see the Empress."

But the astrologer's eyes were fixed on the horoscope.

"You've never let me study this thoroughly," he complained. "It's such a fascinating chart." Then, looking up: "It's not a long life, you know—and the end is likely to be sudden—and not peaceful."

Mardonius jumped to his feet.

"Stars or no stars," he rasped, "come to the Empress."

As soon as Constantius had returned from the basilica he received Eusebius. When the First Chamberlain rose from the abject proscynema which etiquette required, he already knew that the Emperor was in a difficult mood.

"I am happy to report that my divine Emperor can sleep quietly," he said. "The rebel is dead."

Constantius avoided his eye. "Blood—always blood," he said morosely. "We return from church—and the first thing we hear is that blood has been shed."

It was always the same trouble with Constantius—he wanted things done, and then hated those who had done them.

Eusebius was accustomed to it.

"Will the Emperor deign to hear his slave's report?"

Constantius sighed. "In the name of Christ," he said unctuously.

"Almost five years ago," began the First Chamberlain, "the Emperor, in the kindness of his heart, decided to raise the eldest son of an executed rebel to the august rank of Cæsar and to trust him with the highest office in the Eastern provinces."

"Must you go into these details?"

"Very soon Cæsar Gallus showed that he was truly the son of his father," continued Eusebius unperturbed. His was a legal cast of mind. A case was a case, and if it took a new turn, all details had to be reiterated. "His management of Imperial affairs was an utter failure. Reports came to me of certain utterances, mostly, but not all, made under the influence of drink—utterances for which only the name of treason was adequate. The complaints, both of members of our administration and of the civil population itself became more and more numerous. Yet, so great was the clemency of the Emperor that four times he saw fit to admonish the young tyrant, nothing more than that, and always in the mildest way, so as not to undermine his authority."

"We had to fight Magnentius," said the Emperor with a shrug.

"But finally the situation became such that it was impossible to condone it any further," pursued Eusebius. "A high official, Theophilus, Consular of the province of Syria, was massacred by the people of Antioch at the connivance of his own superior—and, as I had reasons to believe, even on his instigation: Theophilus had been a most loyal servant of his Emperor—and that to Cæsar Gallus was a sort of crime."

"Theophilus reported to you about him," nodded Constantius. "Gallus didn't like that, naturally. But you can't kill people simply because you dislike them. Still—there was not sufficient proof."

"It was the Emperor's opinion that there was not sufficient proof of Cæsar's guilt," proceeded the First Chamberlain pompously. "And so he decided to send two ministers of illustrious rank: Domitianus, the Oriental Præfect and Montius, Quæstor of the Palace, to invite the Cæsar to Milan for a conference with the Emperor. Prince Gallus, drunk as usual, had an open quarrel with the Imperial envoys, had them arrested and killed in the most barbarous way; their mangled corpses were thrown into the Orontes. From that moment onwards it was clear, even to the Emperor's loving kindness, that the young tyrant had become a rebel and that drastic steps had to be taken."

"Yes, yes—must you go into all this, Eusebius?"

"We had to act cautiously, though," said the First Chamberlain, as if he had not been interrupted. "Slowly, on many different pretexts, we recalled legion after legion from the Eastern provinces. But it was still too dangerous to have Gallus arrested openly, in his own capital. One of my best men, the Tribune Scudilo, suggested to the young man, now drunk with power, that the Emperor needed his council and therefore wished him to come to Milan—as a sign of the Emperor's favour Cæsar Gallus would be allowed to open the Imperial games in the capital—an unprecedented honour."

"Of which you didn't tell me a single word," burst out Constantius. "I couldn't believe my ears when I heard of it."

"It was a necessary ruse," explained Eusebius with a cold smile. "And the vain young criminal swallowed it. Just at that time the Augusta Constantina was taken ill and died. . . ."

"May God be merciful to her soul," said Constantius, crossing himself hastily. "She has always been a great nuisance—let's hope that—well—proceed: but make it short."

"What Cæsar Gallus did not know was, that I had had officials despatched to every one of his provinces through which he had passed on his way to Italy, with orders to take over. All troops were carefully kept out of the way of the route on which he was travelling."

"Clever," said Constantius grudgingly.

"In Hadrianopolis, his retinue of more than two thousand soldiers was made to stay on when the Cæsar's post carriages had left. Prince Gallus kept wondering what had happened to them and Tribune Scudilo did his best to quiet his suspicions. But from now on the travelling conditions changed more and more. An escort of German auxiliaries replaced the personal attendants, and when the Cæsar arrived in Pætovio, he felt that he was a prisoner. Then he met General Barbatio, your faithful commander in Illyria and Pannonia, who arrested him straightway. The insignia of his rank were torn off his uniform and a strong detachment of cavalry took him in a closed carriage to Pola. There I met him myself."

"But you are not a legal expert, Eusebius—you know I wanted this done absolutely legally. The Empress—"

"The divine Emperor can rely on his servant. I had the assistance of the Protonotarius Basil and of a military tribune, Scudilo. Every legal formula was strictly observed. There was an official interrogation. Here is the protocol."

Constantius took it eagerly and scrutinised it.

"Good," he muttered. "Very good. He confessed—he confessed both to his crimes *and* to his treasonable intentions—"

He looked up again, suddenly suspicious.

"This is almost too good," he said. "Too perfect. How is it that he admitted all that so willingly?"

"He broke down under the weight of his conscience, Sire."

Emperor and Chamberlain looked at each other. The eunuch's face was mask-like, bland and impassive.

"Go on—" said Constantius hoarsely.

"The divine Emperor had entrusted me with full powers," said Eusebius quietly. "Only one sentence was possible in a case like this. What made it still worse was the infamous imputation of the accused that he had acted on the advice and instigation of his wife. The Augusta Constantina could not refute it—she was dead. To save the honour of the Empress' sister from such foul lies the court decided to omit this part of the accused's confession from the official minutes."

Again the two men looked at each other.

"You did well, Eusebius."

"The Emperor is very gracious." The Chamberlain was hiding a smile under his bow. "Sentence was then passed," he continued, "and as there was no object in any further delay it was carried out within the hour."

"We do not wish to know the details of it," interposed the Emperor hastily.

"There remains only one other matter," said Eusebius lightly. "We must deal with the younger brother, as soon as he arrives. That should be any day now."

"Yes, yes—" the Emperor rubbed his chin.

"It is essential," warned Eusebius. "We have seen the consequences of too much clemency."

"We know," said Constantius sullenly. "You are very likely quite right, Eusebius. A clean break is what we need. But on what grounds can we—?"

"If Your Majesty will leave the matter in my hands, I guarantee that it will be settled satisfactorily."

"A monastery, perhaps—"

"Unfortunately we have seen that monasteries do not hold their inmates with sufficient safety."

"But—for more drastic measures—"

"Prince Julian has been arrested on a charge of high treason," said Eusebius. "Surely the divine Emperor will trust his servant not to make charges of such gravity without being in the position to produce the necessary evidence—if that is required."

The Emperor glared at him: "You have evidence?"

The eunuch shrugged his shoulders. "There are further minutes about the confession of the late Cæsar Gallus. . . ."

The Emperor shuddered. "Not now, Eusebius—not now."

We shall see about that later on. We must receive Nevitta now—he's been waiting a long time. There is very discomfiting news from Gaul."

"Yes, Sire—but the young Prince—"

"All in good time, Eusebius. You have done very well. We are grateful. You may ask for a favour—any favour. Speak up, man—what is it you want?"

"The head of the only man who can still endanger the throne of my Imperial Master—Prince Julian," said the eunuch without hesitation.

Constantius sighed. "We find it very difficult to deny a wish to so much loyalty," he said. "And if there is really evidence—yes, I think—you will have your wish in the end, Eusebius. We shall pray that we may be enlightened to act as we should."

"There is only one way to act where the safety of the State is concerned," pressed the eunuch.

The Emperor nodded. "God will give us strength, Eusebius."

The eunuch bowed deeply and withdrew. He knew the battle was as good as won—if no one interfered. The only thing to do was to see that there was no interference.

In the ante-room he saw General Nevitta, striding up and down in obvious impatience, Draco, the Emperor's giant Life-guardsmen and an officer with the rank of tribune, whose face seemed familiar to him—of course, Tribune Glabrio—the right-hand man of the Chief of Police.

Prince Julian had arrived, then. He nodded in reply to Glabrio's polite salute and went to his own suite where his first secretary handed him a lengthy document.

"From Tribune Glabrio?"

"Yes, Illustrious." The secretary gaped in admiration. Truly—nothing could happen at Court without the First Chamberlain's knowing all about it. He came straight from the Emperor and he already knew that Tribune Glabrio had delivered a letter for him.

Eusebius opened the heavy roll and began to read it; it was a very accurate report of the Tribune's journey with his prisoner from Ephesus to Milan.

In the meantime Draco had announced Glabrio to the Emperor, who received him immediately. Draco was sent out to postpone Nevitta's audience which did not exactly mitigate that worthy's temper.

"The prisoner, Prince Julian, is in safe custody, in the pavilion, as you ordered, Sire."

"Good, good. Where is the report I asked you to make?"

"Here it is, Sire."

"With every word the prisoner spoke?"

"No, Sire."

"Why not?" frowned the Emperor.

"It was impossible, Sire. The prisoner quoted almost incessantly from three or four dozen different writers, poets and philosophers. I should have needed at least three secretaries to write it all down."

Constantius glared at him. A sense of humour was not his strong point. "Did he try to escape?"

"Oh no, Sire. Came like a lamb."

"Stay here while I read."

"Yes, Sire."

After the first few sentences the Emperor looked up. "To how many people have you shown this report?"

"To no one, Sire," said Glabrio cheerfully. It was not even a lie—he had never shown this report to anybody—only a copy of it. And he hadn't *shown* that one either—he'd given it to Eusebius' secretary. And this would mean a bag of gold from Eusebius and sooner or later Lucilianus could look out for another job—not a bad thing to be Chief of Police in the capital!

The Emperor went on reading. The words of arrest—the effect on the prisoner—he had asked what sort of high treason he was supposed to have committed by studying philosophy and metaphysics and had been answered that he would hear all in good time. The attempt of an elderly gentleman to interfere was duly rebuked. It was a man of the name of Maximus, well known in Ephesus as the head of a so-called mystic school. Prince Julian had been living in his house. The way back to the house, where Julian's belongings were packed into bundles. Of the three slaves, one, named Callias, insisted on remaining with his master, and, as the instructions allowed for a personal valet, he was told to go on board the ship immediately, which he did. The rumour of the Prince's arrest had spread, despite the most elaborate efforts to keep it secret. There was a crowd of about six hundred people in the street, in front of Maximus' house, and another of over two thousand on the quay. The crowds did not take a threatening attitude, but there were shouts of "Leave the boy alone! We like him!" and even of "Long live Prince Julian!" The prisoner seemed to be a popular figure in Ephesus.

Even more so in Athens, which was the end of the voyage by sea. The news of his arrest spread like wildfire and there were crowds at the port, crowds at the main police station and still bigger crowds in front of the inn where they spent the night. Twice the people rioted and had to be dispersed.

with spearshafts. A number of arrests had been made—some were common hooligans, trying to make use of the upheaval by looting a silversmith's shop. But others were students of several schools, who told the examiner that they had heard Prince Julian was going to be executed and that they wished to free him because they liked him. A man of about thirty-five seemed to be the leader of the gang, but he got away, and all that could be found out about him was that he was a physician. The arrested students were released after twenty-four hours' detention and a stern reprimand; their names had been taken. The prisoner had behaved well all the time—he had never complained and had twice reprimanded his valet who had asked for softer pillows and, on another occasion, for fresh vegetables for his master. During the riots in Athens the prisoner had tried to dissuade the crowd from demonstrating and had actually succeeded in preventing bloodshed in several cases. A well-known rhetor, by name of Libanius, had openly criticised the action taken against Prince Julian and had been fined a pound in gold. He had written most politely to the Quæstor, asking whether by payment of a pound in gold monthly, he might be allowed to make a speech every month in favour of Prince Julian's liberation. The Quæstor had not thought fit to answer the letter or to take any action against the rhetor, as this might have led to further incidents. During the rest of the journey the prisoner had shown a calm, or as he himself called it, a philosophical attitude.

The search through the prisoner's personal belongings had shown nothing of any interest. There had been only two letters from Cæsar Gallus, one six months, the other over a year old. They were of no consequence.

"Is that all?" asked Constantius.

Glabrio snapped to attention. "Yes, sire."

"Has the prisoner been told of what has happened to his brother?"

"No, Sire—I knew nothing about it myself. We have only just arrived."

"Good—not a word about Prince Gallus in his presence."

"Very well, Sire."

A sharp questioning look: "What is your opinion of the prisoner, Glabrio? Speak frankly—we like frankness."

Yes, thought Glabrio. When it suits you, you like it.

"A very erudite young man, Sire—always reading books and always talking about philosophy and poetry."

"Yes, yes—I mean—surely he must have asked you again why he had been arrested?"

"He did not, Sire."

"Do you think he is dangerous, Glabrio?"

"I don't know, Sire. There was no evidence."

The Emperor sighed. "You are not very helpful, Glabrio."

"My orders were to talk to the prisoner as little as possible, Sire."

"Yes, yes—very well—you may go."

"Thank you, Sire."

Glabrio clanked out of the room.

Nobody was helpful. One had to do everything alone. This document was a panegyric and not a police report. There wasn't a single point one could make use of. A lamb on its way to the slaughter house. But a very popular lamb, apparently. A lamb that attracted yelling crowds in Ephesus and caused riots in Athens. Eusebius would know how to make this appear as a sure indication that Julian had been in league with his brother. He and his minutes—extorted from a man under the fear of death—he will never understand that I want *inner* proof and not just a faked statement. Now if he had only given me a sworn statement of his own that Gallus had said all these things without coercion—but no, he must make innuendoes about how he's got them, he must show me how clever he is and thus I must bear the responsibility. Was that loyalty? No one was loyal—except Eusebia.

Draco announced a special courier from Gaul.

More bad news, of course. It was really an infernal nuisance. It seemed as if one would never be allowed to settle down to anything. First the Persians, then Magnentius—then Gallus—and now these savages from the North; they had actually taken more than a dozen towns in Gaul; Strasbourg was among them, and Worms and Spire—and Tongres in the North. The damned check of it. Fortunately General Vadomar was holding them in the main fortress, the biggest city in the North—Cologne.

Vadomar was a German himself, from some tribe or another, but for some reason he disliked the attacking tribes, Franks and Alemanni, and he had been in Roman service for many years—a very capable man.

The courier came in, a tribune of the Twenty-third legion. He saluted smartly, delivered his roll and waited.

Constantius saw that the man looked tired and worried. "Go and get them to look after you."

"Thank you, Sire."

He seemed relieved to get out of the room.

Constantius opened the roll, read and became very pale. Cologne . . .

And not in an honest fight either. Vadomar had simply

gone over to the barbarians, and with him a great number of German auxiliaries.

Once a German, always a German. To hell with them all. He had thought of sending Nevitta, but Nevitta was a German too, despite his twenty-five years in Roman service. To hell with Nevitta.

It had been too much lately. He rose and left the study. In the ante-room people bowed but he did not see them. In the corridor there was consternation. The Emperor—trotting along without suite, without even an aide-de-camp—unannounced. Where was he going? Eusebius was immediately told and he sent three officials after the imperial breaker of etiquette, with orders to watch but not to interfere, and then followed himself.

At the head of the big staircase he was informed that the Emperor was moving towards the Empress' suite. A second message told him about the courier from Gaul and the fall of Cologne. He had studied Glabrio's report and was delighted with it. A man who seemed personally in favour of Prince Julian, but who had to report about riots! Without knowing it, he had done great disservice to the young imperial snake, by stressing his popularity. In Constantius' eyes to be popular was far worse a crime than anything else, short of rebellion.

Constantius went on, without looking to left or right; he was deep in thought. Thais, ever watchful, had only just time to announce his arrival to her mistress.

"No, stay," said Eusebia to Cherubaal, who had made a hasty movement towards the door. "It's too late now."

The little Chaldean obeyed; he had only had a few minutes alone with the Empress. . . .

Constantius entered.

"We find you in sorry company, my dear," he said. Under his withering glance Cherubaal began to bow his way to the door. But the Empress beckoned him to stay.

"A fine adviser," jeered the Emperor. "Have you read in the stars what your own future is going to be like, sky-monkey? Has it occurred to you that your wonderful wisdom has almost plunged the Empire into a second civil war?"

"Divine Emperor—"

"Stars! What fools we have been ever to believe that their twinkling meant anything—"

This was more than the little Chaldean could bear. His frail body stiffened. The thin hand holding the black staff with the ivory knob ceased to tremble.

"I appeal to the Emperor's justice," he cried with a vehemence

mence that made Eusebia look at him in utter amazement. Even Constantius was startled. The Chaldean's wizened, monkey-like face was rigid and taut; his eyes sparkled. "I have had a long life," he said tonelessly, "and I have been allowed to help many people—I am old now and weary: I don't mind going where we all have to go one day—astrologer, beggar or emperor."

"We think you are forgetting yourself, Cherubaal."

"No, Sire, I remember myself as what I am. I do not fear death, and maybe, when I arrive at the end of the long journey, I shall be received graciously by—the Powers. There is no blood on my hands."

The Emperor became very pale. "Do you dare to insinuate—" but he did not finish his sentence. With astonishment and almost with horror he saw that Cherubaal's eyes had become wide and glittering—the eyes of a visionary.

"The time has come for you to make a decision, Sire—and the decision is a vital one for you and for this Empire of yours, which is threatened. And yet—one day you will have gone, and another day the Empire will have gone—for nothing is everlasting that has been made by man; but the stars will go on in their appointed courses and there will always be men to read their meaning. For the stars were not made by man and He, who is divine, can never create anything without a meaning."

The little Chaldean took a step forward. It cost the Emperor a great effort not to recoil.

"Some years ago I gave you advice, Sire. I said that the great Empire of Constantine would prevail through its own strength. I maintain what I said; not a single province, not a single city will be torn away from it by any kind of barbarian, as long as the house of Constantine is in power. There may be attacks and temporary gains—but no lasting success for the barbarians. It was the Emperor who thought of employing Prince Gallus in a political task—not I and not the stars. I had never seen Prince Gallus' horoscope. I had only seen that of his younger brother Julian—and for that reason I made my prophecy."

"I suppose it would surprise you and your stars very much, if Prince Julian were to be executed to-morrow morning," jeered Constantius. Eusebia sank into a chair.

"No, Sire," said Cherubaal firmly. "It would not surprise me—for Prince Julian has not long to live in any case."

"Sure of that, are you?" asked Constantius sharply.

"Yes, Sire—I am. But if he dies you alone must save the Empire—no one else will be able to help you."

"Will the divine Emperor give me permission to have this

professional liar arrested?" asked the thin voice of the First Chamberlain. He had heard quite enough from the doorway—it was time to take a hand.

"What are you doing here, Eusebius?"

"I apologise profoundly, Your Majesty, but news has just come in from Gaul—"

"Gaul? I know. Don't bother me with that now. Why are you so angry with Cherubaal?"

"I have nothing against his superstitious practices, except when he uses them for a little political game of his own, Sire. He and the Councillor Mardonius are working together on a scheme of their own; for some reason unknown to me they sponsor Prince Julian. The divine Emperor will remember that Mardonius brought up the young Prince."

"Cherubaal?"

"Councillor Mardonius is an old friend of mine, Sire—but there is no question of any scheme."

"Where is Mardonius?"

"At Your Majesty's command," said the eunuch, entering.

"My First Chamberlain does not seem to be very fond of you, Mardonius?"

"Naturally not, Sire."

"What do you mean, 'naturally not'?"

"I mean, Sire, that the First Chamberlain will always be opposed to people who try to be useful to Your Majesty—because he regards such usefulness as his own privilege."

This with a slight bow towards Eusebius.

"Very well then, Mardonius," said Constantius slowly. "What is your advice in the present situation? Be useful to your Emperor."

"My advice," said Mardonius calmly, "is to consider the voice of the heart and the needs of the Empire—not personal hatred."

"That was exactly the advice that made the Emperor promote Prince Gallus," shrugged Eusebius. "We have seen what comes from that stock—"

"I admire the First Chamberlain's courage more than his intelligence," said Mardonius. "Prince Gallus came from the same stock as the Emperor himself."

"That's done it," said Cherubaal with great satisfaction and he turned his thumb downwards as though Eusebius were a fallen gladiator.

Eusebius saw that he had lost ground. He decided to attack.

"What I admire is the patience of the divine Emperor in listening to these two buffoons. The criminal ambitions of Prince Gallus have been proved. Are we going to let it hap-

pen again? There are rebellious elements in the provinces as well as in the capital—and maybe even in the Palace. I have heard rumours that the young Prince has made use of the abundant funds given to him by the generosity of the Emperor to buy himself supporters, ready to fight for him—”

“Nonsense,” said Mardonius.

But the Emperor was deeply impressed. He remembered Glabrio's report; those crowds in Ephesus and Athens—were they paid by Julian's agents? Was that young viper already preparing his own way to power? If not, why should he wish to be so popular . . . ?

“Enough,” he said with a gesture of finality. “We refuse to debate our decisions, but we think you are right in one thing at least, Cherubael. Prince Julian is not likely to have a very long life.”

He bowed to the Empress, who had not uttered a single word, turned sharply and left.

CHAPTER XX

The pavilion where Julian was awaiting his fate was a small round building which the Emperor Trajan had erected as a temple for Minerva, the Roman Athena—as an expression of his thanks for a wish granted by the goddess. Under Constantine it had become a storehouse for all sorts of things, especially garden implements, and it had had to be emptied and cleaned in order to make it a suitable place for the custody of an Imperial prisoner.

There was no back entrance, and a double sentry—German hirelings who spoke neither Greek nor Latin—were guarding the door.

They were changed every two hours and never kept watch twice. The prisoner must not be in a position to make friends with them.

Callias was allowed to stay with his master. He slept on a carpet in the outer ring, Julian on a small camp bed in the inner, the former sanctum. No visitors were allowed. He had asked for books, but Callias found himself unable to convey the message to anybody.

The slave who appeared three times a day with food and wine had to deliver it to the sentries. There had been no contact at all with the outside world for almost four days. But Julian had his own books—they had not taken his luggage away from him. He would have liked to sacrifice to Minerva; his initiation in Ephesus had given him the status

of a priest—but first the temple had to be consecrated anew, and that could not be done without many preparations and ceremonies which could not remain unobserved by the guards.

So he contented himself with meditation and prayers to the virgin goddess. He still did not know why he had been arrested and brought 'all the way here—from Ephesus to Milan. There were possibilities enough: he might have been denounced for almost anything. His last speech in Athens for instance—although that was a fairly long time ago. It could not be for his association with Maximus and his mystic school, for Maximus himself had not been arrested. But as the mood of the Emperor was good enough cause to sentence anybody, it was futile to think about a reason. That could always be found if one wanted to find it.

His father had died an innocent man, why should not his son? All his relations, save Gallus, had been murdered by Constantius. Why wonder if it should be his turn now? Maybe Gallus had something to do with the matter—he seemed to have behaved very badly.

However—one had made the best of one's life to the best of one's ability, and one had to be thankful that this had come after his initiation, consecrating his life to the gods. . . .

If Constantius had decided to separate Julian's soul from Julian's body, he was welcome. There was nothing about this body that would make him regret such a decision; it was still a lean thin thing—stronger than it looked but on the whole rather frail and not at all beautiful. Let it be dissolved and the soul go free to its home.

Wolfgram and Ebrowin, Frisians in Roman service, were on guard when it happened, and their description of the incident caused, later on, grave anxiety to the Centurion on duty and a good deal of envy on the part of their comrades.

"We were standing there, you see; near the end of the watch it was and nothing to report so far—when she came up, through the laurel grove. Now I don't like those skinny women that they call pretty in this country—with yellow skin and black hair and so much paint on their faces, you never know what is underneath. But this was different. This was something I'd give three years' pay and my decorations for, if I could take it home with me! Holy Wodan, Jesus and Freia, what a girl she was! Tall and—just right—you know what I mean, when she walked she was rustling all over the place, boys. I've never seen anything like it. I looked at Ebrowin and his eyes were popping out of his head and his mouth was wide open. I said, 'Pull yourself together, man,

d'you want the lady to look straight down into your stomach?" But he didn't even hear me. Nearer she comes and she's smiling at us—boys, you've never seen a face like that in all your lives and you never will—it made your knees go funny and your mouth water—all right I'll stick to the story, but I had to tell you what it did to me because you see I am the one who really likes girls and I couldn't think of anything else. But Ebrowin here could, not being as I am, and so he saw that the lady wore a purple border on her stola and he snapped to attention and gave the salute, the Imperial salute, see: zick—zick—zock! And I began to understand that this wasn't a goddess but the nearest thing to it and I go zick—zick—zock! too. What do you think she does? Just smiles again and waves—like this, see?—and goes straight into the pavilion. 'D'you think it's all right?' says Ebrowin here and I say, 'Never seen anything more all right,' but then I think and I know what he means and I shrug my shoulders: 'Purple,' I says, and Ebrowin here nods. Can't stop anyone who's got the purple border, can we? Purple is the Emperor's colour. What a surprise for His Highness in there with his books and vegetables. . . ."

It was—and it must be recorded as an odd fact that the first reaction of Julian, Prince of the blood, philosopher of Athens, and initiate into the mysteries of Eleusis and Ephesus was not at all different from that of the soldier Wolfram of the Second Frisian cohort, Forty-seventh legion.

The tall girl appeared in the inner room—Callias was asleep—and Julian was so dumbfounded that he did not even get up from his chair. Seriously he thought for a moment that the goddess had appeared to him; then he recognised the face he had seen once before in reality and many times since in his mind.

"Helena!"

"Good morning, cousin Julian," said the goddess coolly. "You haven't changed much, have you? Still books, books, books."

"The Emperor is kinder to me than I expected," said Julian.

"Constantius?" The goddess smiled disdainfully. "He has no idea that I'm here, of course. No one has, not even Lady Lupina. It was my own idea. I wanted to have a look at you, once more, before—"

"Before I die?" smiled Julian. "Or before you go to Persia?"

"Silly," said Helena. "D'you know they seriously thought I was going to marry old Sapor, just to please them? As soon as they told me in Athens, I put my foot down. I know all

about Sapor—Prince Hormisdas told me. I wish you'd meet Hormisdas; you'd learn a lot from him. One never has a dull moment with him and he's sweet. Good-looking, too. You don't look too well, cousin Julian. They say philosophers always neglect themselves, so I suppose they've made one out of you after all. That oily old Libanius and all those people, blah, blah, blah."

"You don't think much of philosophy, do you, Helena?"

"I don't think much of the virtues of the Emperor Nero, cousin Julian—and I think even less of your beard."

Julian grinned. "What's wrong with it?"

"Oh, it's awful. Hasn't any girl ever told you what a beard does when you kiss her?"

Julian laughed. "Who told you that I've ever kissed a girl?"

Helena frowned. "Haven't you?"

"No."

She shook her head. "You don't look like a liar," she said. "And you *are* such a baby—so it might be true. How very amusing."

"And have you kissed a man?" asked Julian gravely.

"Of course not," said Helena angrily. "I'm a girl. That's an entirely different thing."

Julian rose. "But you've just asked me about girls who might have kissed me," he said slowly. "How could they—if girls don't do that sort of thing?"

"Oh, I suppose—some very low girls do," said Helena with great contempt.

"And what makes you think I should be interested in very low girls?" asked Julian with mock indignation.

Helena burst out laughing. "You *are* funny, cousin Julian! I wonder what you really look like without that cabbage growing on your face and with tidy hair. At least you should have little strings of pearls in your beard like Hormisdas." She wrinkled up her nose expressively. "He perfumes himself from head to foot, at least twice a day—he admits it himself! Persians must be awful, don't you think? Tell me—does Constantius really want to have you killed?"

"I don't know," said Julian, growing serious. "Did he tell you so?"

"No, but almost everybody else did. I haven't seen my brother for the last two weeks, except for a few minutes at meals. He's frightfully busy about politics. All he can talk about is armies and troops and things, ever since the Germans invaded us."

"The Germans? Invaded us? Where—How—?"

"Oh, I don't know—somewhere in the North, I think."

"Of course not in Africa, Helena—"

"Well, why should I know all about barbarians, cousin Julian? You don't know anything about girls!"

"That's hardly an analogy," protested Julian. "Anyway, I don't suppose I shall have much opportunity of finding out about barbarians or girls if the Emperor is going to kill me—"

"It must be pretty awful to sit and wait for it," said Helena thoughtfully. "Are you very afraid, cousin Julian?"

"No, Helena."

"Not very much?"

"Not at all, Helena."

She eyed him, wondering. "Then you must be a terribly good Christian," she said. "And even so—Lady Lupina is a terribly good Christian, but she is very much afraid of death. She admits it herself!"

"I'm not a terribly good Christian," said Julian. "But that's what philosophy does to one, you know."

"But don't you love life?" asked Helena eagerly. "I'd like you to love life—people who don't are so dull."

"I do love life," smiled Julian. "I love it here, and—elsewhere."

"I don't understand that," declared Helena. "And I must go now or Lady Lupina will have fits, and fits aren't good for her. She's much too fat. She admits it herself. I must be off. Goodbye, cousin Julian—I do hope Constantius won't have you killed. I think you're rather a pet. I'll talk to him if I get a chance."

She blew him a kiss and was gone.

Outside, Wolfgram and Ebrowin again snapped to attention: zick—zick—zock!

When Callias went to look after his master he found him neither reading nor praying. He was sitting cross-legged on top of his table, chuckling to himself.

"Callias—"

"Yes, Sir."

"On the whole, life could be regarded as well worth living, you know."

"Yes, Sir."

"It would be almost a pity if one had to die now. Yes—I'd regret that. I admit it myself."

"Yes, Sir."

Callias had always thought that this eternal reading and praying would do something to his master's mind, one day.

When, next morning, a centurion arrived with two subalterns and gruffly told Callias to get his master ready, there was no doubt what decision the Emperor had taken.

Callias was trembling, there were tears in his eyes.

"Good old fellow," said Julian smiling. "Don't take it too much to heart. Wherever I go—it's bound to be a better place than this one. You'll find my will on the little table, signed. I've seen to it that you are all right; but I'm not sure whether they'll recognise it as valid—sorry, Callias. Give all my love to Mardonius when you see him, and tell him 'Achilles has conquered'—will you remember that? Good."

The three officers in front of the pavilion saluted smartly. He returned the salute.

"On the Emperor's order," said the Centurion. "Follow me."

And he marched on.

Julian thought seriously. Are they going to finish me off without a trial? Rather barbaric. We used to be the greatest nation in the world, judicially. It is a shame that we should have come to this.

The Centurion marched through the smaller entrance of the Palace. It led to a staircase, used by the servants. But once inside the building, he turned sharply and entered a small room. When Julian had followed, one of the subalterns closed the door behind him.

The Centurion pressed a knob in the panelling and a small staircase appeared. "You will go before me now, Prince Julian, if you please." Shrugging, Julian ascended the steep stairs. He had always heard that there were many such secret stairs and doors in the various Imperial palaces, but it was the first one he had seen, and would very likely be the last. At the top of the stairs he found another door which he could not open. When the Centurion had caught up with him, he pressed it sideways and it slid back.

An enormous man in full armour was standing in front of them, filling the entrance. "Prince Julian," reported the Centurion. The giant nodded and stood aside. A beautifully furnished ante-room.

"Straight in, if you please," said the giant, and he lifted the edge of a heavy curtain. His face was expressionless.

Julian walked forward—and stood face to face with the Emperor.

Despite his surprise, Julian registered every detail with a strange, almost uncanny clarity. He saw that Constantius was formally dressed—as for a State occasion—and that he was armed. A sword with a golden hilt, set with rubies, and a short dagger. He saw that Draco, the giant who had let him in, was standing just in the position to watch every movement; saw the sheathed legs of half a dozen guards under the cur-

tain at the back of the room. The Emperor had certainly taken his precautions against any eventuality. But his face, as always, was a rigid mask. His surroundings betrayed his feelings, not his face.

Julian bowed.

"It's a long time since we last saw you, Julian," said Constantius drily. "Do you know why you are here?"

Julian threw his head back. "All I know, Sire, is that a tribune called Glabrio arrested me in Ephesus, four weeks ago, on a charge of high treason."

"Ah—and what do you say to that charge? Are you guilty?"

"Certainly not, Sire."

"Do you admit that there have been riots in Ephesus and Athens to liberate you by force from the hands of my servants?"

"Nothing of the kind happened in Ephesus. There was some rioting in Athens—on the part of a few students, and I suppose some undesirable elements took the opportunity of looting a store. I did my best to dissuade the students."

"Then why cause the riots?"

"I was a prisoner, Sire. I couldn't have caused any riots, even if I had wanted to—which I didn't. But if causing riots is the reason for the charge against me, there is an error here; I was arrested before there was any riot."

"We don't care for insolence from a prisoner. It is the duty of the State to take precautions against impending crimes—not to wait until the crimes have been committed. Why did you try to endear yourself to the people to such an extent that they would riot for your sake? We have reports of all your activities, mind you; tell us the truth. Lying would make your case even graver than it already is."

"I have no intention of lying, Sire," said Julian almost contemptuously. "I have committed neither high treason nor any other crime. I went about my studies in Athens and in Ephesus and that's all I did. High treason is a word applicable either to political or military activities. I never had anything to do with either. Never."

The Emperor took a roll from the table and pushed it into Julian's hand. "Read this."

It was Eusebius' official protocol. Julian read. At first he was intensely aware of the Emperor's watching him, but soon he forgot all about it, and read and read. He could see Gallus being lured away from his capital, further and further into the web of the Imperial spider, until the spider struck, at Pola. . . .

Constantius, watching him, saw him become paler and

paler—saw the tears in his eyes. Then Julian put the protocol back on the table with trembling hands. "Poor Gallus," was all he said.

"You pity him?" asked the Emperor sharply.

Julian looked up. "Yes, Sire—I do. He was never the man for the position with which he was entrusted. He just couldn't do it. He might have been a good officer in the army, perhaps. But he did not understand power—and it poisoned him. I am deeply sorry—for him."

"Sorry, that he did not succeed, I suppose?"

Sadly Julian shook his head. "No, Sire, not in the least. He's been a bad Caesar and if he had been unfortunate enough to succeed, he would have become an even worse Emperor. But the worst part of it all is that he broke his oath. The—the Powers can never forgive that."

He's a simpleton after all, thought Constantius, and he asked rather lightly: "So you would never break an oath?"

"I'd much rather die," was the quiet reply. "Death is only transformation, but a broken oath is *spiritual* death—that is simple logic."

He is not only a simpleton—he is cracked, thought Constantius.

"Perhaps," said Julian, deep in thought, "he may be forgiven after all—he seems to have been contrite and his suffering must have been acute. Perhaps there will be mercy for him in the end. He was such an impulsive—boy. Yes, a boy. I only saw him on that one day—and I couldn't help feeling somehow that he was the younger of us."

Constantius took a step forward. "How much did you know of your brother's plans?"

Julian looked at him. It was as though he were returning from some far-off place. "I knew nothing of his plans, Sire."

"We have reports about every single step you took, and of most of what you said. Will you repeat your words on oath?"

"Certainly, Sire."

Constantius took a heavy silver crucifix from the table. "Swear it."

"I swear that I had no knowledge of any of my brother's plans."

"We are inclined to believe you," said Constantius slowly. "Are you ready to swear allegiance to us—if we should choose to entrust you with a mission of importance?"

"Yes, Sire."

"Listen then. We are on the verge of an important campaign against the tribes of the Quadi and some of their Sarmatian allies who are threatening our frontier on the Danube. The news seems to have reached certain German tribes in the

North. In the belief that our interest is fixed on the Danube, they have crossed the Rhine, and invaded Gaul in several places; some of our towns have fallen into their hands. It is a minor thing, of course, but rather a nuisance—and we cannot be everywhere at once. A punitive expedition is necessary. We do not wish to entrust it to a stranger—we have had enough experience of that with Magnentius. By nature we are inclined to believe in our own family rather than in strangers. The rebel Gallus has wounded our belief—will you heal it—and make good your brother's guilt?"

Julian's eyes gleamed. "By the Sun—yes, I will, Sire."

"By—what did you say?"

"By the Sun, Sire—whose light and warmth makes life possible on earth."

"Yes, yes, quite. I thought . . . but I would rather not ask you that. You have lived so long with unbelievers, heretics, pagans—may Christ enlighten you. We wish you would seek guidance from our friend, Most Reverend and Venerable Bishop Valens—"

"So it's not Bishop Arcadius any more, Sire?"

The Emperor raised his hands in horror. "Why, the man is a Catholic—and a dangerous one at that! Bishop Valens is a disciple of the great Arius—surely you know that we have embraced the one and only truth of Arianism. How *could* Christ be consubstantial with the Father, considering that He had a human nature as well as a divine one and the Father hadn't? One would think that it is obvious that Christ is like unto His Father, but not consubstantial with Him—a child can see that!"

"Quite," said Julian.

"Bishop Valens was with us at the time of the battle of Mursa," went on Constantius. "It was he who foretold that the battle would be won just when it looked as good as lost. We are devoted to him."

"Quite," said Julian.

"However," said Constantius, "this is not the moment for debating theological questions. We shall deal personally with the main threat—on the Danube. We have chosen you to deal with the—mmm—unrest in Gaul. We do not expect you to be a great general—"

For the first time Constantius' rigid face showed something like a smile—it was difficult to say whether it was contempt or pity.

"After all, your career so far has not been exactly a military one, but you'll have to act as our representative, and we shall therefore confer on you the same title that your brother so grossly abused—you will be Cæsar."

Julian gasped. To him, having never lived at Court, the word Cæsar still held the magic of olden days—Cæsar; the great Julius himself, conqueror of the Earth, and before all, conqueror of Gaul.

"You certainly don't look the part," continued Constantius drily. "We shall have to have something done about your appearance. As a military commander we can't have you running around with a Sophist's beard. You will be given efficient help with your task—the generals Marcellus and Barbatio."

The latter's name had of course been mentioned in the protocol of Gallus' trial, and Julian frowned.

The Emperor nodded imperceptibly, satisfied with this reaction.

"The plans of strategy and tactics are being developed here, by the Imperial staff," he went on. "You see that everything is being done to make your task even easier than it already is. But you cannot expect us to give you an army—we shall need every single man in Italy for the war on the Danube. You will have to make use of the troops stationed in Gaul; there are more than enough there anyway. Have I made this all quite clear?"

"Yes, Sire," gulped Julian. "And—I am most grateful," he added hastily.

"You may go now. Draco will look after you. In an hour's time we will ourselves present you to our guard, and to the garrison of Milan."

The Emperor's chief barber went to work—Gerontides, a man of magnificent bearing, most elegantly dressed, the master of over a thousand barbers in Imperial pay. He earned a large salary, quite apart from his fees; he was given a daily allowance for twenty servants and twenty horses. When he had finished with Julian's hair—now laid in neat curls—and with his beard—leaving smooth cleanshaven chin and cheeks, the Imperial chief tailor took over, then the chief sandal-maker and the chief armourer.

The finished product of their efforts felt very ill at ease.

Accustomed to his beard, he felt naked without it. Unaccustomed to armour he found it difficult to keep his balance. The helmet of gilded bronze, with its huge comb, topped by a plume of horse hair, dyed red, seemed to reach into infinity.

He was half-amused, half-angry and very uncertain of himself.

An actor, playing a Homeric hero for the first time, he thought.

If only I don't get stuck somewhere with this damned armour . . . if only I don't fall over something.

His sword, a beautiful thing in an ivory sheath, was dangling between his legs.

I'll have to have lessons, he thought. Just as well I did a bit of physical training in Athens. I wonder what Libanius would say to all this—and even more what Maximus would say . . . and Mardonius, too! And what is the little Princess going to say now that my beard has been sacrificed on the altar of Mars! I couldn't help thinking of that when Constantius held forth about it. She'll probably scream with laughter and say, put it on again!

Ye gods—what a peacock they've made of me! The leader of an army—I've never even led the tenth of a maniple—I've never given an order except to my valet or my cook. It's funny. This is the greatest comedy there ever was. What do I know about Gaul? Not a thing. *Gallia omnis est divisa in partes tres*—can't do any harm to read the immortal Julius' immortal book again! What will history say some day about me? I never wanted this, did I? Cæsar in spite of myself. So he accidentally became a conqueror—not bad! Libanius would have . . . never mind what Libanius would have—at least for the present. This plume is tickling me.

Anybody sniggering? If they aren't, they should. Mine is a far worse start than poor Gallus' was. He was at least accustomed to military ways. What is the situation in Gaul—the real situation? Constantius was so busy belittling the trouble that it is very likely serious. Well, what if it is? Who am I to be critical? What have I got to lose? Whatever it may be—Constantius certainly wants me to lose it. How delighted he was that I didn't like the idea of having Barbatio as one of my generals—my brother's murderer, or, anyway, his executioner.

There's a snag somewhere—there must be—and very likely more than one. But for someone about to be beheaded I haven't done so badly, have I? Ah—here are the chariots—

A young officer in field uniform, with a firm resolute chin and clear eyes came up to him and saluted.

"Tribune Sallust—by order of the Emperor, Aide-de-Camp to Cæsar Julian "

Julian returned the salute. He was glad he liked the man—he knew instinctively that he was going to play an important part.

"The Emperor wishes the Cæsar to drive in the same chariot with him," said Tribune Sallust and he pointed to the Imperial chariot.

At that moment the Emperor himself came down the stairs, magnificent in the uniform and armour of the Commander-in-Chief, but wearing a diadem instead of a helmet.

Salutes were exchanged, the Cæsar's presence acknowledged with a stiff nod. Then Constantius mounted the chariot and Julian felt himself being helped up too. It seemed almost a miracle that all this went without a hitch.

Five hundred heavy cavalry were formed up in front, over a hundred chariots with officers and Court officials—another five hundred mounted guardsmen brought up the rear.

Julian was looking about, but he could not see Mardonius, and the Emperor whispered: "Face front—and don't move about."

Then he beckoned. The commander of the cavalry barked an order and the procession was on the move.

Ten minutes later they reached a huge field, used as a training ground by the garrison of Milan. The garrison was there in full force—eight thousand men, reinforced by another two thousand men of the Imperial Guards. It was a magnificent spectacle.

A rostrum had been erected, covered with purple cloth.

The Imperial chariot stopped in front of it and the Emperor got out, slowly mounting the rostrum. Julian followed. He had never seen so many soldiers together. In a few months'—in a few weeks' time he would have to lead many more—and he knew nothing about it—not a thing. It would be irresponsible—impossible. One would have to study the whole matter. Every one of these glittering little figures was a human being, a child of the Sun—the true Sun. And their lives would be given into his care. . . . But now the Emperor was speaking. He addressed the ten thousand men who were formed in a semi-circle. He wasn't a rhetor of course, and Libanius would have laughed at some of the long-winded sentences—"Come to the point—the verb, the verb—don't let it flutter about until it's dead—give us the verb!"—but apart from that it wasn't so bad, really; the way he told his soldiers of the danger threatening the State was precise and clear; the way he appealed for their "consent" to the necessity of "rewarding the honour of the purple to the promising virtues of the nephew of the great Constantine," was quite clever. He did not mention that he had killed all the other relatives of the great Constantine.

What did they murmur down there—those thousands of glittering beetles?

Suddenly, instinctively, Julian knew that *they liked him*.

The gods alone knew why they should—but there it was, like a breath of warmth, a gust of wind that had passed through the rays of Helios—it made one feel strong and idiotically proud. All the blood went to his head. For the first time in his life he realised that a mass of men was a new sort

of entity by itself, with its own strange actions and reactions, with its emotional life and its own dynamics—he knew that he was learning something entirely new to him and he raised his head and gave a long searching look at that entity which was a semicircle of men—that curious being whose Head he was going to be—shaped like a crescent it was—for parade of course, not for battle array. But what if one should arrange them in that form for battle? Cavalry on the flanks, infantry in the centre—like a beetle, taking the enemy between its pincers—

Suddenly the beetle roared. . . . Ten thousand shields went up, glittering in the sun. The Emperor had finished his speech, but only to start another one—this time directed, in loud and metallic tones, at Julian himself. He exhorted him “to be worthy of the sacred name of Cæsar through heroic deeds”; assured him of his friendship “which would never be impaired by time, nor severed by their separation.” The troops roared again and clashed their shields against their knees.

Then the Vestiarii arrived, carrying the purple cloak of the Cæsar. The Emperor himself took it from their hands and draped it over Julian’s shoulders.

It’s much too wide, of course, thought Julian. I shall probably trip over the damned thing and do a somersault down the steps of the rostrum. That’ll be something for the troops.

But instead the Emperor went down with him, arm in arm.

To the thundering acclamation of the soldiers they remounted the chariot and drove off, with a sea of glittering armour to the right and left of them.

All flippancies left him and deeply moved, Julian quoted to himself a verse from Homer that now seemed to have taken on a new and deeper meaning: *So he was seized by purple death and almighty fate.*

Once more he felt invisible hands gently pushing him forward—as in Byzantium, five years ago—as in Ephesus, last month.

Whither?—what was awaiting him at the end of the road?

What did it matter—did not even the sun die, every day, the purple death on the horizon?

CHAPTER XXI

General Barbatio found the First Chamberlain supervising the final stages of his packing. "Going away, Eusebius?"

"Yes, as you see; the Emperor has graciously given me leave for three months—it's long overdue."

Barbatio laughed and Eusebius gave him a cold stare. "If you want to talk to me, let's go into the other room—they've finished in there."

"As you like."

In the other room—the First Chamberlain's study—everything was neatly packed away, even the furniture.

"Looks more like goodbye for ever," ventured Barbatio, and sat down, arms akimbo, on the largest packing case. He was a huge man with a rough sunburnt face. He looked exactly like the prototype of the gruff, genial professional soldier, and many people had made the mistake of believing that he was really what he seemed to be. Eusebius, of course, knew his cousin inside out—but that was mutual.

"It's looked like that before," said the eunuch with a shrug. "What'll you bet me that I'm recalled before the three months are out?"

"I'd never think of betting with you," grinned the soldier. "If I lose, you'll make me pay—if I win you'll find a loophole of escape. How was the Emperor—stormy?"

"Oh no, charming. He's always charming, when he's got the better of me."

"And so he has, by God. It was hardly worth while making me kill off the older cub just to have him replaced by the younger one."

"That's true," nodded Eusebius. "You're not stupid, Barbatio—you have the intelligence of a really intelligent animal."

"Thank you for nothing," laughed Barbatio. "Anyway—you succeeded in smuggling me into the new outfit, so I mustn't be too hard on you. Mind you—you should have seen little Julian's face when we met, at our first official conference. He looked at me as if my tunic and hands were soaked in his brother's blood. Never addressed me once."

"Not very surprising—after all, you *did* kill Gallus."

"What of it? If I hadn't—*he* wouldn't be Cæsar. There's no gratitude in this world. . . ."

"What's your impression?"

"It's going to be great fun. Marcellus is in command of the

cavalry, as you know—and he proceeded to give him a bit of a lecture on military matters. The little man looked at him and said: 'You're quoting from Frontinus' book on strategy—chapter six; but your quotation is incorrect. Frontinus says: "When the enemy's attack against your centre has lost its momentum, the opportunity for a determined counter action with cavalry may arise on either wing, *preferably the one supported by advantages of terrain.*" You omitted the sentence starting with "preferably." Oh, it was too good to be true. Marcellus was humming and hawing, so little Julian went out and fetched the book and showed it to him, and there it was, just as he'd said. He smiled like an angel and said very politely in his precious Greek accent: 'It's not surprising, Marcellus—after all you learnt that twenty years ago and I learnt it yesterday.' Then he quoted the rest of the chapter—by heart! Christ Almighty—I wonder what chapter he'll be quoting when the Germans have broken through his line. . . ." Barbatio, still laughing, wiped the tears from his eyes.

"The bookworm becomes a general," said Eusebius. "Well—I almost hope he is good. It would be far better for me."

Barbatio opened his eyes wide. "What on earth do you mean?"

"Pretty obvious, my dear cousin! What do you think the Emperor made him Cæsar for? To win back Gaul?"

"Well—"

"Surely if he wanted that, he'd have sent you—or Marcellus—"

"Marcellus is an ox."

"Well, Severus then, or Ursicinus—or Nevitta—there are enough generals who know their business after all."

"I don't agree," said Barbatio curtly and the eunuch laughed.

"Of course not—but never mind that for a moment. The Emperor sends a young whippersnapper who knows nothing about war. He tells him, 'There is unrest in Gaul—go and quell it. Get yourself an army—I can't give you one.' In the meantime he himself makes preparations for a real war—on the Danube, where he'll have a walkover. When Julian has come to grief, he'll recall him and do the work himself, with an army six times the size of the one that the young Cæsar can scrape up. Simple."

"Great idea," nodded Barbatio.

"It was my farewell present to the Emperor," smiled the eunuch.

"But why did you wish that Julian should be successful—he can't be—but what did you mean?"

"Idiot! If he's good, and achieves something, it will not only spoil the Emperor's plan—it will make him more suspicious than ever. Magnentius was good too. If Julian could do the impossible and win just one little skirmish—I'd be recalled within three days."

"Maybe you're right. But anyway at the moment you're out."

Eusebius frowned. "I'm out—but I know my enemies now. That fat swine Mardonius—I ought to have known better than to plant him here in the Palace—"

"Mardonius? He had a long talk with the little Cæsar. I saw only the beginning of it. They embraced each other with such enthusiasm, I almost forgot that poor Mardonius isn't in the position to enjoy *real* ardour—with all due respect to you, cousin Eusebius."

"Oh, go to hell," said the eunuch indifferently.

"I will and shall—but for a while I do want to have my fun."

"What else is there to discuss?"

"Oh, nothing—I shall keep you informed of the goings on, of course. There is one other thing—the Empress had a talk with her young sister-in-law—now there's an appetising little piece for you—and there's a rumour, of course—"

Eusebius laughed—it was a horrible, silent chuckle. Even Barbatio shuddered slightly. "What's funny?"

Eusebius went on chuckling. "It seems, Barbatio, Fate has decided that our divine Emperor *must* make every mistake of his life twice over. First Gallus, then Julian—"

"I, Flavius Claudius Julianus Cæsar, swear by my hope of eternal life, by the wounds of my Saviour Jesus Christ, by the Holy Cross, and by all the Saints in Heaven, loyalty and obedience to my Imperial Master, Constantius Augustus, sole Emperor of the Roman world. And if I break this oath, may leprosy befall my body and the curse of God my soul."

Such an impressive formula, thought Julian. He was alone in his study now, and it seemed to him that it was the first time for years.

One would think that this oath would suffice. But no, Constantius must draw his newly sworn Cæsar aside, and whisper: "You have lived too long among godless people to be trustworthy in matters of faith; maybe the wounds of Christ do not mean as much to you as they should: repeat the oath to me—by what you hold dearest and most sacred."

Strange man, my Imperial cousin, Julian mused. If I could consider treachery I would be a wretch and a scoundrel. And what price the oath of such a man? Why make him swear at

all? But I suppose he's right—most men are driven by fear, including Constantius. It's impossible for him to think of a man whose mind cannot even consider treachery—

"Cousin Julian!"

—so it ~~wasn't~~ wasn't an impressive formula—it was just stupid and born of petty suspicion. Leprosy— isn't a man who breaks his oath far worse than a leper anyway? It's like threatening a man that he'll get a cold in his head if he dares commit suicide.

"Cousin Julian!"

Julian jumped up.

"Why, you must have been asleep in the middle of the afternoon," said Helena reproachfully. "And I thought you'd be wrapped up in military meetings."

"I am, Helena. This is the first half-hour that they've left me alone—I was thinking—"

She wrinkled her nose.

"It's certainly an improvement," she decided. "Why, you have quite a nice mouth—and you're decently dressed, too."

"You approve of me, then?" smiled Julian.

"Y-yes, I suppose I do. Just as well, too. I made it quite clear that I wasn't going to marry you unless I approved of you."

"M-marry me?" stammered Julian.

Helena laughed. "Don't tell me you didn't know! Everyone else does."

"Marry—" repeated Julian. It wasn't true—it couldn't be true.

"I'm a bit frightened too, I admit it myself," nodded Helena. "Still—a girl must marry some time, you know—and I shall be twenty-two next month."

Julian touched his forehead. "I don't believe it," he murmured. "The Emperor—"

He could not collect his thoughts. Helena to him was Pallas Athene, the virgin goddess, the immaculate, cool, haughty one—what mortal could think of marrying Pallas Athene?

The immaculate goddess laughed. "So you didn't know? It's true anyway. I got hold of Constantius just after my visit to you. Eusebius was there, trying to be beastly about something or somebody. I said I wanted to talk to my brother alone. He was so bewildered that he simply came with me to the little red reception room. I said I wanted you. He looked at me and said: 'Why?'—just like that. He just couldn't understand it."

"Neither can I," said Julian, still out of breath.

Again she laughed. "I don't know why really, either," she said. "Perhaps—because you looked so funny over there in

the old pavilion. I thought to myself here's someone who needs looking after. He needs someone sensible. But I didn't know what you would look like without that beard, and—"

"Are you quite sure I'm awake?" asked Julian hoarsely.

She shook her head. "No, not at all. Because, if you were, you couldn't stand there like your own statue—"

He moved towards her, a little unsteadily. "A mortal can't kiss a goddess and live," he said, "but no mortal could be fool enough not to take his chance— I'm sure I shall wake up— I've dreamt it so often before—"

Marcus Messalla, Aide-de-Camp to the Emperor, entered Cæsar Julian's ante-room and was greeted by the Tribune Sallust. "A message from His Majesty—the Cæsar is expected in the seventh hour for private audience."

Sallust nodded. "I shall announce you immediately," he said and disappeared behind the curtain. He was back so quickly that Messalla raised his eyebrows. Sallust had not had time to utter a word.

"What happened?"

Sallust grinned. "I take it the Emperor wishes to announce a closer union between his family and the Cæsar, isn't that it, Messalla?"

"Y-yes—"

"Cæsar Julian has anticipated the wishes of his Emperor," said Sallust innocently.

CHAPTER XXII

"Still afraid?" asked Julian.

"No."

"Happy?"

"Silly," said Helena.

In the dim light of the bridal chamber he could see her profile. Perhaps she was smiling—one couldn't be sure.

"I wish you were one tenth as happy as I am," he said. "It can't be more or it would kill you."

"Are you dead then?" asked Helena.

He nodded. "I must be. I'm floating on a cloud, so high that I can see the stars dancing with each other. I've no weight at all."

"Nice," said Helena sleepily. "What colour's the cloud?"

"Rainbow colour, of course. You know—I never quite believed Homer with his story of Helena who was so beautiful that nations waged war for her—but now—"

"I don't like Helen of Troy," said Helena emphatically. "She was so stupid."

"She had no conscience, you mean—"

"No—she was stupid. Prince Paris was just a good-looking good-for-nothing, like—like Hormisdas. It wasn't worth it."

Julian chuckled. "Poor Hormisdas—final judgment has been passed on you. And that after all his flowery compliments to you at the banquet—and his wedding present: four of the loveliest horses I've ever seen. They do know something about horse breeding in Persia—especially the Parthians."

"Julian—"

"Yes—"

"I hate Hormisdas."

He smiled. "Such a strong word, dearest. Why hate him? Because he uses perfume?"

"I—I just hate him."

"Of course you don't. You couldn't hate anybody if you tried. What's he done to you?"

"He's arrogant, and sly, and—he hates us, too."

"It's difficult to be a prince in exile, Helena."

The night was quieter now; but from time to time music was wafted up from the streets, where the young folk of Milan were still dancing in honour of the Imperial wedding. Wine and bread and meat had been distributed and the young couple had had to ride through the poorer districts to throw silver coins from huge leather bags.

"There are people more worthy of hatred than Hormisdas," said Julian dreamily. "But to-night at least I can't hate anybody. Not even the barbarians who are burning our towns in Gaul."

"You'll beat them," said Helena with perfect assurance.

"I've got to, dearest." Her husband nodded. He was intensely stirred by her confidence in him. "But what makes you think I can beat them? I've never been a soldier, you know!"

"I think you're clever," said Helena. "You're like a monkey—you'll do something they don't expect."

"The monkey is greatly flattered," laughed Julian. "Well, I do hope I can prove to you that your choice has not been a wrong one; it's not an easy task, I know; after all, you might have been Queen of Persia—"

"Never!" was the emphatic reply. "No power on earth could have made me marry Sapor."

"Why not," teased Julian. "He's not bad-looking—though not exactly a youngster—"

"He's fifty-nine and very good-looking and strong. But

there would have been other women about. Women with rights of their own, and the one who gives birth to a son is the chief wife."

"I see." Julian felt a little uneasy—he didn't know why. "You are well informed, aren't you?"

"I had to inform myself. Constantius quite seriously thought of it. They keep their women away from other men—they are just playthings, laden with jewels and silks and things—and there's always some old hag of a queen mother who plays one wife against another."

"Besides—you might have had to become a fire-worshipper, as they are," said Julian slowly, but his heart was beating faster as he said it.

"I don't think so," was the cool answer. "Constantius is so terribly zealous over these things, he would have insisted on some priests going with me and all that. No, I don't think I would have had to change my religion—and that would have made my position still worse. I could never have become influential at the Persian Court."

"But you yourself—surely you couldn't have made yourself believe what the Persians believe."

"I don't know—how could I know?" She began to laugh. "I'd like to see Lady Lupina's face, if I changed over—I'm sure she would have fainted dead away. She did once—when she discovered that we'd got into a Sabellian basilica for Mass, by mistake. It took three men to pick her up; she's so fat, poor thing, she admits it herself. I never laughed so much in my life."

"Strange girl," said Julian. He knew he should have been happy that she didn't pay too much attention to the seriousness of religion; it would make things easier for him—it might even be possible to sow the seeds of the true belief in her soul; and then they would be really united—really married. And yet—he did not feel happy. Perhaps it was the memory of the marriage ceremony that morning, in the main church, in the presence of seven Arian bishops and a legion of priests—the endless chanting, the flowery sermon of Bishop Valens, the incense; he'd felt that at any minute he would scream: "Stop it—stop it all. I don't believe a word of all this. I don't believe in your Galilean, consubstantial with His Father or not." But it had to be borne, the whole stream of liturgy, one had to kneel and get up and kneel again and look pious about it. All one could do was pray, secretly, to the true Sun, to Helios, the Never-to-be-conquered, for forgiveness and for his blessing. . . . Was he married, truly married to the cool, lovely creature lying at his side? Married in the eye of the gods?

"Julian—"

He bent over her, felt her slim body sink deeper into the soft cushions, stuffed with rose leaves. Her mouth was awaiting him eagerly.

When Helena awoke, she found herself alone. As she pulled the rope with its row of tiny bells, her lady-in-waiting entered. It was Lady Lupina, enormous in her yellow morning gown.

"Good morning, Lupie," said Helena sleepily. "Have you seen my husband?"

"Yes, Princess. He's been up a long time; in fact, most of the night, his slaves tell me."

A slight sniff that followed made Helena laugh.

"He's been up, has he? Doing what?"

"Oh—studying maps of some godforsaken countries in the North—"

Helena's eyes sparkled. "Good," she said. "Very good. I think I was right, Lupie—there's something in him after all. . . . He's not stupid, that old sky-monkey, Cherubaal . . ."

Three hundred and sixty men on horseback clattered and clanked in the courtyard of the Palace. Sixty of them were officers.

Julian, ready for departure, saw them from the window of his study.

"My army is here, Sallust."

The young Tribune laughed. "We shan't get very far with that lot, Cæsar."

"Hardly. Has a Roman commander ever set out with half a cohort to conquer—or rather reconquer a whole province?"

"I doubt it, Cæsar."

"I don't. I know there hasn't. Well—it's rather amusing. At least one can try something one has never tried before. Have you packed my maps? Good. The Empress has been very kind to me and sent me a whole library complete with Librarian. All my favourite authors are in it. She is a thoroughly good woman. Why on earth she should have . . . well, never mind. Have you heard when my wife is going to be allowed to follow us? The Emperor changed his mind about it three times, yesterday."

"Yes, Cæsar. Princess Helena will follow six hours later—with three ladies-in-waiting, her physician, sixty-four slaves, of which forty-two are women, and a bodyguard of thirty cavalrymen."

"A very accurate report, Sallust. I only hope it won't be changed again."

"I don't think it will, Sir."

"They have a most disconcerting habit of working out everything for me—I'm not at all sure whether I shan't be told what to eat and when. Ah—here is Rufinus."

The Legate Rufinus, in field uniform, saluted stiffly. "Sixty officers, three hundred cavalymen present, Cæsar. Twenty-three field wagons with heavy equipment and supplies are waiting on the Mars field."

"Good. Who's that now? Why—Mardonius— Very well, Legate, I will be down presently. Go with him, Sallust. I must say goodbye to my oldest friend."

When the men had gone, Julian said gently: "You shouldn't have come, Mardonius. I tried to give you a hint yesterday, at the official farewell. You're exposing yourself. In spite of everything that has happened, I'm not persona grata with my brother-in-law."

"Not in spite of—because of what has happened, Julian."

"Well—as you know that—"

"We only die once, Julian—and something tells me that my time hasn't come yet. Of course my visit to you now will be reported to the Emperor. What does it matter? Your worst enemy, and mine, Eusebius, is out of the way—but it may not be for long. If and when he comes back, it will mean bitter fighting—*then* my life will be in danger; so will his. I have come to-day, to be the last man to say farewell—just as I was the first to start you on the road."

"I can never thank you enough for that, Mardonius—whatever may happen to me."

The eunuch took a step forward. "Greater things may happen to you in the future," he whispered. "You must be ready for them."

Gravely Julian said: "I'm the Emperor's general, Mardonius."

The eunuch's eyes glittered. "Magnentius was a clumsy barbarian," he said. "You have been through a better school, and . . ."

"Be silent," interrupted Julian. His voice was still gentle, but the expression on his face belied all gentleness. "Not one word more, Mardonius, by our friendship I have sworn an oath to Constantius."

"By the Galilean, yes—"

"—and by all that I hold most sacred. But even the first oath binds me—it was asked for and given in good faith. As long as he lives, the Emperor is my master."

"Julian! Are you the man who has studied history in Nicomedia and Athens? Do you still believe that history is

built on agreements made and kept? There is such a thing as necessity—"

"There is no argument in this matter, Mardonius."

"And—the gods? Who is going to renew them in this Empire, unless it is you?"

Julian sighed deeply. "I have often thought of it, Mardonius. I don't know. But the gods cannot want me to break my oath. Clean must he be who wants to be Helios' priest."

"After all these years—still a child," said Mardonius with a shrug.

"No, Mardonius, on the contrary. It takes a man to keep an oath, when things are going against him. And I forgive you for having thought that I could act differently. You are still my oldest and greatest friend—goodbye, Mardonius. . . ."

Julian picked up his helmet and left. Quickly Mardonius went to the window. Too early, he thought. He has not succeeded yet—in Gaul. Maybe he won't succeed—in spite of old Cherubaal and his stars. But *if* he does—we shall see.

Julian appeared in the courtyard. His horse was led towards him.

A slave helped him into the saddle. He was not an experienced rider—his seat was bad and his movements nervous and jerky.

Sallust was riding up and Legate Rufinus. Now the young Cæsar gave a sign. Rufinus barked a command and the little troop of men was set into motion. They would pass the front of the Palace and perhaps the Emperor and his family would come to the window and wave him goodbye on his way to Gaul and—what?

Keep his oath. The fool. As though Constantius would hesitate to betray him on the first suspicion.

"As long as he lives, the Emperor is my master!"—at least that word would be worth thinking about, when the time came. . . .

As long as he lives . . .

CHAPTER XXIII

"Halt! Who goes there?"

"Friend."

"Give the word."

"I've no idea. I've only just arrived."

"Wait, till we have a look at you."

The shadow of a giant legionary approached. "Damn this

climate—one can't see a thing at night, with all this mist about. Ah, here you are. Alone?"

"Ycs."

"What's your name?"

"Oribasius. I'm a physician—in fact I'm Cæsar's Julian's physician—or so he told me in his letter."

The legionary whistled and three more shadows came into sight.

"Take this man over to the Centurion," said the giant. "He says he's the Cæsar's own personal ointment manufacturer. I can't check up on him here, and he doesn't know the password."

The three men took Oribasius away with them. Soon he saw the shadows of tents, long precise rows of them. The Centurion of the watch, a bow-legged man with his face covered with scars, sat at his desk—an upturned packing case.

"Physician? Oribasius? Right. Come with me."

Out into the rain again, to another tent, a bigger one this time, with a double guard in front and a flagstaff with a banner. The tent was divided into two sections. In the first four subalterns were writing at their tables—they did not even look up. A fifth took the Centurion's report and nodded. "I'll go in at once."

"The Cæsar's busy. I suppose," said Oribasius.

The officers looked at him in blank surprise, but did not answer. Half a dozen higher ranking officers were standing in a corner, talking in subdued tones. An aide-de-camp came out with a sheaf of papers, some of which he distributed among the four scribes. With the rest he left the tent.

By Asclepius, thought Oribasius. Four scribes are not enough it seems! Is he running a war or a publisher's business?

Now a young tribune came out. "Legate Rufinus—"

One of the officers went into the second section, and Oribasius caught a glimpse of Julian, sitting at a small writing table. He did not seem to have changed much, from what one could see, except that he wore military dress. There was still more scribes in his part of the tent.

"Leave the curtain open, Callias," said Julian, without looking up. "The air's bad in here." Then to Rufinus: "I want you to send fifty men to each of the small towns on this list—there are eleven in all; every detachment under a centurion, who will make *this* proclamation to the inhabitants, first in Latin, then in Gaelic; here is the translation. We must have at least another hundred volunteers from every

town; the detachment that gets more than a hundred men will have double rations for a week, the centurion double salary. But mind you—one complaint that a man has been pressed into service and there's no reward for anybody. I want *volunteers*. That's all. Tribune Faustus! How far along are the twelve ballistas I ordered three weeks ago?"

"They'll be ready next week, Cæsar."

"I heard that song a week ago. What has slowed up the work?"

"I don't know, Cæsar."

"It's your business to know. I want the foremen of the gangs in this tent to-morrow at ten."

"Yes, Cæsar."

"Trebonius! Write an urgent letter to the saddle manufacturers in Massilia. I want twelve hundred more saddles in eight weeks. In eight weeks here, in Vienne. They will have to find the transport. Send the same letter to the armour factory also in Massilia, for the same amount of cavalry armour, helmets, swords and spear blades. Payment on delivery. The usual threat for non-delivery. Now get busy. Tribune Ammianus Marcellinus! I want a complete register of equipment at hand by to-morrow evening. Who else is there, in the ante-room? By Helios! It's Oribasius. I'll be with you in a minute. Just give me time to finish this letter; it must be on its way. Where is the messenger?"

"Waiting here, Cæsar," came the answer.

"Good." Only now Oribasius realised that Julian, giving orders, had gone on writing all the time. Now he signed, rolled up the parchment and gave it to Callias to apply the seal.

"Ready, my Oribasius. Do come in—you are very, very welcome. Why, you look magnificent! My friends, this is an old friend, a learned physician, whom I made travel here all the way from Athens. Ready, Callias? Here's the letter, Tribune. Off with you. I'm expecting you back from Milan in a fortnight at the latest. Callias, my cloak—the simple one. What did you say? Dinner? Haven't I had it? No, I suppose not. Get us some cold meat when we come back. I won't be long; don't pull faces, you know it doesn't help. Good night, friends. Come, Oribasius—we're going for a walk. You're not tired, are you? Splendid, come along."

Outside the tent, Julian drew a corner of his cloak over his head. "Got to make the round myself, sometimes. Must know what they think—and there's nothing better than first-hand information. We'll talk later."

The walk became a full hour of stalking little groups of

soldiers; to Oribasius the occasional snatches of conversation they overheard meant little or nothing. One fellow told others that the Alemanni were all over seven foot and another boasted that he knew all the roads as far as Rheims in the North from a former campaign—a few derided the “little philosopher who thought he was a general”—the rest was obscenities and complaints about the food. But Julian seemed highly satisfied and chuckled all the way back to the tent, where the scribes were still writing reports, and Callias waited with cold meats, fruit and wine.

“We shall be alone to-night, you and I, Oribasius. Usually I share the meal at the officers’ mess. And now tell me all about yourself, and Athens and Libanius and everything. I have one whole half-hour for you.”

“They say that the north wind is the quickest of all elementary forces,” said Oribasius. “But I suppose you’d dismiss him from your service for being too slow?”

“Oh, nonsense—all this is just acting. If one acts long enough and well enough, it becomes second nature. And then, people must feel that there’s a fresh wind blowing, or else I shall never get my army together. Eat, my friend—it’s simple food. I’m afraid, but I’ve done away with luxuries. It was my first order. No pheasants and no stuffed chickens, no cooks with ambitions. I share the same food with my officers *and* men. There’s no distinction whatever. Where’s your luggage?”

“In Vienne, Cæsar—I thought I should find you there, but—”

“I’m there every day for an hour or two, to be with Helena; I can’t let her live in the camp, can I? Not that she would mind—but no other officer has his wife with him.”

“I haven’t had time to congratulate you,” said Oribasius, his eyes downcast.

“Thank you—yes, I’ve been so lucky, it frightens me sometimes. Remember that day when she walked into the lecture hall, where I was talking piffle about old Nero’s virtues? I had something to live down, hadn’t I? She was supposed to marry the Grand King Sapor then.”

“Yes—why didn’t she?”

Julian laughed. “She altered the course of history by simply refusing. She’s wonderful, Oribasius—I can’t tell you how glad I am to have you here, so as to look after her, when—well—”

“I see,” murmured the physician. He began to peel an orange, but his hands were unsteady.

“And you don’t know what that means to me to have one man at least with whom I don’t need to play the hypocrite—

I still have to go to church every Sunday, you know—if I don't, it's immediately reported at Court."

"Then you have informers here too?"

"Heavens, yes—there's Faustus, Trebonius and several others!"

"You know who they are, then! Why don't you get rid of them?"

At last the orange was peeled.

"I haven't the slightest intention of doing that. If I did, the Emperor would only send new ones, whom I *don't* know."

Oribasius nodded. "I'm a simpleton, I'm afraid," he said. "Anyway I don't think you've been just lucky, you know. You've grown since I last saw you."

"I should hope so," smiled Julian. "But my men still think I'm a little boy playing soldiers. And what my horse thinks of me is worse still—I shall never be a good horseman—I'm not built for it. Had to practice with sword and shield and spear—I'm full of bruises and fresh ones are added daily. Oh Plato, Plato, what an occupation for a philosopher! As it is, the only one who believes in me is my wife—you will see her to-morrow in Vienne; may Helios bless every moment of her life."

"And the life growing in her," said Oribasius hoarsely.

"I like your Oribasius," said Helena. "I don't know at all how he's going to get on with my physician Menes, but I like him much better than Menes—I admit it myself."

Julian, seeing Oribasius blushing, laughed contentedly. "They were sniffing at each other full of mutual suspicion," he teased. "There seems to be as much opposition between the disciples of Asclepius as between those of the Galilean."

"Julian!" warned Helena. "You know I don't care, but you've got to be careful. If someone overheard you saying that sort of thing—"

"You're right, as usual, my dear—but I wish you knew how difficult it was for me to keep up this hypocritical attitude all the time—"

"Yes, yes, I know. He's awful in these things, Oribasius. Do you believe in Helios too? He's told me all about the true Sun and all that, but I can't understand a word of it. He says it'll come."

"Oribasius has a very special god," smiled Julian. "One for himself alone."

"I believe in letting everybody believe what they wish to believe," said the physician drily. "And I reserve the same right for myself."

He had finished the examination. "Everything so far is go-

ing very well," he said. "There is not the slightest need to worry."

"Is it going to be a boy?" asked Helena eagerly.

The physician laughed. "That is something no one can tell you before the child's birth," he said.

"I *must* have a boy," insisted Helena.

"*We* must have a boy," corrected Julian gently. "Mind you, I won't let you throw it away if it's a girl after all."

"It won't be a girl," said Helena. "I hate girls."

"I'm glad these rooms are being kept warm," said the physician. "Yours aren't, Cæsar."

"Nor are my soldiers' tents," was the rather curt reply.

Helena made a wry face. "He's like old Cato in the history books," she said. "He's so just that it hurts."

The Tribune Sallust entered. "The council has assembled, Cæsar."

"Very well, I'm coming. I'll be back soon, Helena, my dear. Amuse her, Oribasius, whilst I'm playing soldiers."

He left abruptly. Oribasius, following him with his eyes, said: "I've seen many people change—but this is something I've never seen before."

"You like him, don't you? Have some wine—it's good—Cæcubrian. He never drinks it. 'My troops haven't got Cæcubrian, so why should I?'"

"He's overdoing it," said Oribasius.

"No," contradicted Helena. "He's quite right. He'll get somewhere. I always felt it, except when I first met him—"

"In Athens—I was with him then."

"I didn't see you."

"No, Princess—I don't suppose you did."

"You look like an owl," said Helena thoughtfully. "A clever owl—I like you. You mustn't get frightened of Lupie—Lady Lupina, I mean; she's always trying to keep people away, poor darling. She's afraid someone might eat me. Just come whenever you like."

"The Princess is very gracious," murmured Oribasius. "I have very little experience of Court manners, I'm afraid—my practice in Athens—"

"Does this look like a Court?" laughed Helena. "My only luxury is having two rooms heated—Lupie can't stand the cold. We must rough it for a while. I'm the wife of an army commander now."

"Of the luckiest army commander in the world," murmured the physician.

Helena raised her eyebrows. "Didn't you say you knew nothing of Court manners?"

"I did," growled Oribasius. "And it's true. I must go now."

Helena laughed. "You're right. You must learn them. Rule number one: never leave royalty before you have been given permission to go. *I tell you when to go.*"

"I'm sorry," stammered the physician. "I didn't know—there you are—"

"Go, my Oribasius," said Helena with a gracious gesture. "And come back to-morrow morning."

"Thank you, Princess."

When he had left the room, he felt as if he were slightly drunk. I shouldn't have accepted this job, he thought. She's more beautiful than ever—she's quite incredible. I shouldn't have accepted. . . .

"The situation in Gaul is fluid," explained General Marcellus. "It has been, ever since the Alemanni crossed the Rhine. There's no question of an occupation of Gaul by the enemy. Brabant and Flanders—Toxandria—in the North and the Rhineland from Cologne to Basle are the only provinces that are really occupied. Even there the Germans have not settled down in our cities and towns, against which they seem to have a peculiar dislike—they much prefer to live in rough camps, surrounded by tree fortifications and many of them have actually started tilling the soil. The wealthy classes have fled south with their belongings and slaves. Cologne is supposed to have suffered most, when the Alemanni stormed it, but we haven't got very exact reports about it yet. The leader of the Alemanni is still their king, Chnodomar—said to be seven foot high. His tactics consist mainly of sending out swift troops, two or three—sometimes up to eight thousand men, on surprise attacks, and the mobility of these swarms of robbers is such that they usually get away with it before we can do anything about it. This has of course created a general atmosphere of uncertainty and fear all over the provinces—the latest news, three days ago, was of a swarm pushing down from the direction of Basle over Besançon and Dijon to Autun, where negotiations are supposed to have been opened with our garrison."

"Delightful report," murmured Legate Rufinus. "We might just as well not exist. The damned cheek of it all."

Julian did not bat an eyelid.

Marcellus' elegant cavalry figure stiffened a little.

"It goes without saying," he continued. "That at the present stage at least, we are quite unable to launch counter action. Our preparations are far from complete—we haven't got more than five thousand men altogether—"

"Four thousand eight hundred and thirty-two," interrupted Julian.

"—and many of them are not fully equipped—"

"Seven hundred and fifty," said Julian quietly.

"We have not got enough transport even for these numbers," resumed Marcellus, visibly a little irritated with these pedantic interruptions. "Also we should arrive too late to save Autun. I recommend waiting until we have at least twelve thousand, preferably fifteen thousand men."

He sat down and arrogantly crossed his legs.

Julian looked round, but no one seemed to wish to speak. Naturally, Rufinus was a rough fighter, with no more brain than would stuff an orange. Faustus, Trebonius and Ammianus were tribunes only—one couldn't expect them to stand up to Marcellus.

He rose. "My friends," he said mildly. "It is now two hundred and fifty years since Tacitus wrote his little book about the Germans—"

Rufinus groaned and Ammianus, whose hobby was history, hid a smile.

"I quote from Tacitus," resumed Julian calmly. "'As the fatal destiny of the Roman Empire approaches, there is only one thing to save us; the discord of the tribes.' Well—here we are, still in an Empire threatened, but not lost, far from lost. But we should learn from the historian. The one danger to be feared is that the Alemanni unite with the Franks. It must be the aim of our strategy to prevent it. That is why I chose the final assembly of our forces at Rheims. As for the tactical issue: there is a garrison of two thousand at Autun and it would be a regrettable loss if they should capitulate. Therefore I have smuggled twenty good men under Tribune Marcus Capito into the town, with special orders—I'm expecting news at any minute. . . ."

"Impossible," said Marcellus. "You can't have news back as quickly as that—the distance is too great."

"It's over a hundred miles, that's true. But Capito's orders are to leave a chain of men, in order to light beacons as soon as the issue is decided. One beacon for 'we hold out'—two beacons for 'we are out of danger.'"

Rufinus' watery eyes widened.

"Quite a good idea," acknowledged Marcellus grudgingly. "But what if the weather does not hold? In fact, it's misty now. You can't light beacons in the rain, you know."

"Quite," nodded Julian modestly. "That's why they took spare horses—one for each man—with goatskins full of oil."

Rufinus began to laugh. "He's thought of everything, hasn't he?"

Marcellus became angry. "They can't do a thing, anyway—what's two thousand men against Chnodomar's force. . . ."

"Two thousand Romans," interposed Julian sharply, "should always be a match for any number of barbarians."

Marcellus gulped. But before he could find an answer to that piece of patriotic boastfulness, the Tribune Sallust entered again with a beaming face.

"Two beacons, Cæsar," he reported.

Julian quietly sat down. "There's work to be done, my friends," he said in his mildest voice. "Thank you, Sallust. You may stay here now—you're just right for the orders of the day: the Eleventh, Fifteenth and Twenty-third legions and all Gallic auxiliaries will assemble two hours before sunrise. We shall march straight to Autun. If we're lucky, we'll come across Chnodomar's troops, but it's not likely. In Autun we collect the garrison and depart as soon as possible for Rheims. The preparations can't remain secret, of course . . . but let the subaltern commanders think that departure will be to-morrow at noon. They'll grumble about the unnecessary haste—blame it all on me. Good afternoon."

As the group of officers clanked out of the room, Marcellus, now very ill-tempered, murmured something about "incredible foolhardiness." Rufinus gave a fat chuckle. "Christ, man—foolhardy or not: I begin to have a liking for the puppy. D'you know what I think?"

"You couldn't think if you tried," jeered Marcellus.

Old Rufinus was thick-skinned. "I think he knows what he's doing," he said. "He may be green—but he knows what he's doing."

CHAPTER XXIV

Well over four thousand men were on the march. First came the light cavalry and the Gallic auxiliaries under Rufinus; then the Cæsar himself with the Twenty-third Legion; Marcellus brought up the rear with the Eleventh and Fifteenth.

Only about five hundred men remained in Vienne, under Tribune Faustus; he had strict orders to take in and train the expected volunteers and to send on the ballistas and other war machines as soon as they were ready.

Saying farewell to Helena had been hard for Julian—but at least he knew she was in good hands. Oribasius was still the same man as he had been in Athens—it was going to be a difficult thing to convince him of the existence of the true gods. They had had a whole hour's dispute about it in the middle of the night, after Helena had gone to sleep—and

he had told his friend about his experiences in Ephesus, about Maximus and Ædesius. Not very much, of course, because there were things that could not be divulged to the uninitiated, even if they might understand them, which was highly doubtful. A hard head, Oribasius. He did not want to see. He felt so secure in his little world of what he called facts, and it was all he cared for. Nothing seemed to go really deep with him. Well, maybe he would fall in love one day—that might stir him out of his cool indifference. There are people who can learn only from things that happened to them. . . .

Anyway; it had been good to talk to someone about the true religion. Helena—such an intelligent creature in many ways—would not or could not understand him; and with all the others it would have been sheer folly even so much as to hint at it.

Helena . . . when she awoke in the morning, he would be many miles away. When was he going to see her again—if at all? After all—this was war. From now on it really was war.

But—the little idea about Autun had come off nicely. Good old Capito! Marcellus was almost bound to complain to the Emperor, but he would come just a little late there; his own letter, explaining his plan in detail, had gone off long ago. . . .

In Autun he found the garrison on parade, with Tribune Capito at the head, almost two thousand men, most of them veterans of many campaigns. The siege was lifted. It had all been a bit of luck, really. The Alemanni had been over seven thousand strong. There had been no negotiations at all. But more than half the barbarians had gone on to pillage the countryside further west, and against the remainder Capito had made a successful sortie, which gave the enemy the impression of far greater strength than the Romans had at their disposal. They did not think it worth while to settle down for a real siege, and withdrew: either for good or in order to return in full strength.

The administration of the town was in a bad way, of course—but that was the case with all Gallic towns. The work of years would be necessary to make up for the slovenliness, the greed and the corruption of the Imperial officials who had thought themselves secure from closer supervision. Invariably the first thing for the Cæsar to do was to abolish unjustified taxation and to dismiss officials, who then travelled posthaste to Milan to complain about him.

"Let them complain," laughed Julian, when Ammian

warned him of it. "I'd rather have these scoundrels as enemies than as friends."

There was an old temple of Jupiter the Saviour just outside the town; it was desolate and there were no priests, of course. The edicts of Constantius had seen to that. But at night Julian visited it alone. There had been no night since he left the caves of Ephesus, without at least two hours spent in meditation. Here in the temple of the first Gallic town regained for the Empire, was the suitable place for to-night's meditation. At midday he had had to go to the Arian basilica. . . .

Three days later he was on the march again.

There had been no war council this time. The Cæsar, on the basis of intelligence reports, decided the route: not along the old, well-built Roman road, but right across the country, the shortest way.

"Let's hope he knows what he's doing," said Marcellus sullenly.

"You'll grumble even in your grave," Rufinus told him. "Remember the beacons?"

"Beacons be damned," drawled the elegant cavalryman. "The only beacons this time will be our own bleached bones."

Julian, with Sallust and two young centurions, was riding forward and backward, insisting on the different contingents, closing up as much as possible. He had had a heart-to-heart talk with Tamborix, a Celt serving in the Eleventh legion, the man he had overheard boasting about his knowledge of ways and roads to Rheims. The man was excitable and cocksure, like many of his race, but he had a good war record and really knew the roads. Now he was marching again in his column, with three pieces of gold in his pocket.

When Julian rode up to Rufinus, in the vanguard, he found the old fighter monosyllabic and sullen.

"What's the matter with you? D'you regret the fleshpots of Autun?"

"No."

"Or is the climate getting on your nerves?"

"No."

"Well—what is it? You are sniffing around as if you smelled something."

"I smell trouble."

"Nonsense."

"No, Cæsar. There's blood in the air."

He had scarcely finished his sentence, when a scream went up, long drawn and terrible, unforgettable for anyone who has ever heard it in his life—the scream of a dying horse.

And almost immediately five, six, twenty other screams followed, only to be drowned in the sound of a thousandfold roar.

"Up, shields," cried Rufinus. "Form the tortoise."

Julian looked back. They were marching over a meadow, seamed with forest on both sides, and out of the forests swarmed hundreds and hundreds of horses—no, riders—no, cavalry, mixed with infantry. . . . There was a man on foot running alongside each cavalryman, clinging to the mane of the horse . . . stark naked, but for a piece of wolf's skin round his loins.

The Alermanni . . .

How interesting, now, thought Julian. The same sort of attack as Tacitus describes. They haven't changed in two and a half centuries, these Germans. Then, only, he remembered that it was up to him to do something about it. But what?

He tried to make out how many they were and the direction of their assault. They seemed to rush down towards the end of the marching column, where Marcellus with his two legions was in command. No screams were coming from the vanguard.

A thousand—fifteen hundred—no, two thousand men in this first wave and there was another one forming under the trees.

The other side? By Helios, there they were coming too and in at least the same numbers. No doubt this was the swarm who had been besieging Autun, between six and seven thousand in all, two waves of two thousand each sent in from either side, with another thousand to fifteen hundred to follow, and if this went on long enough, they would take the two legions in the rear into the jaws of a crocodile. . . .

"Tribune Sallust!"

"Cæsar?"

"Ride over to the vanguard. They're to turn about and march across that field over there. First the Light Horse and then the Gallic auxiliaries. *Slow march*, Sallust. And no attack, before they hear the tuba signal. *My tuba*, not theirs."

"Yes, Cæsar."

Sallust swung his horse round and went off at a gallop.

"Legate Rufinus!"

The old fighter was breathing heavily. "Didn't I tell you, Cæsar? I smelt it. There was something—"

"Never mind the smell. Take the men from Autun and the second half of the auxiliaries: same manœuvre as Sallust's, at the other side of the road. Gain the heights, but don't enter the forest. *Slow march*, too, and no attack before I give the signal."

"But we don't know how many . . ."

"Obey, Legate."

Stupefied at the tone he had never before heard from the lips of a man half his own age, Rufinus saluted and obeyed.

Julian rose in his stirrups. He could see only a cloud of dust in the direction of the centre of the German attack. The air was full of the most infernal noises, shrieks, neighing, roaring, the clanging of iron on iron like a hundred blacksmiths' shops. Marcellus was an experienced soldier—but the attack had been incredibly swift, and now—now the second wave of the barbarians became fully visible at either side of the forest. Unlike the first, they were on foot only—broad leather shields and huge spears.

Julian looked sharply—but there was no sign of a third wave.

Yes, Tacitus was right. No reserves, an all-out attack, in full force. He looked back. There came the Light Horse, riding slowly, as ordered—and behind them the auxiliaries in compact squares—on the other side of the road Rufinus rode at the head of the legion of Autun, followed by the rest of the Celts. It was a lovely sight.

"The Twenty-third legion—attention!" shouted Julian, fussing with his sword that stubbornly refused to be drawn.

"Turn—about."

They obeyed as on the parade ground.

"Centurion Silanus—bring up six tuba men, right here, to me. Follow me, all of you."

He rode on, without looking back, towards the cloud of dust.

He and his legion might become decisive, if one of the wings failed.

They were both slightly ahead of him at present—good. Ah, here came the tuba men. He beckoned Silanus to his side.

"Order to the Twenty-third: the next signal to attack is *not* for the legion. The legion advances in slow march until further orders."

Difficult to convey that to the various cohorts in time, one should have thought of that earlier, can't be helped now.

The second German wave? Ah, there they came; there was the impact.

The full force of the enemy was engaged.

"Tubas—signal to attack!"

The huge instruments blared out the short staccato tones the world had heard in fear and trembling from Britain to Persia.

With anxious eyes Julian looked at Rufinus—he felt sure

of Sallust, but Rufinus was such an obstinate old—ah, he advanced—quicker and quicker now—and so did Sallust. His Light Horse fell into trot—trot—and now gallop—

But two out of the six cohorts of the Twenty-third had fallen into quick march too, damn them, damn, Silanus, it's my own fault, of course, hold them—hold—them! Good, Silanus—he's held them just in time.

What's that?—the horse twitched and stumbled, damn the horse, up you go—but there's a strange thing, a wooden thing sticking in the horse's flank, feathers, an arrow, and there!—another one's whizzing past, and a fist crashes against one's helmet and it isn't a fist, it's something that grazed the helmet, another arrow, we're being shot at: funny feeling. Damn all feelings—"Of course, I'm all right, Centurion." The turmoil over there is now simply frightful, the noise deafening.

A soldier is staggering back, pressing his hands to his stomach, with something white and yellow coming out of his belly, he holds his own intestines—damn all intestines—

Crash—the light cavalry has broken into their right flank, and Sallust posts his Celts with their arrows and slings higher up, very good, Sallust—but where is Rufinus? He's at them too, but there is no progress—the last detachment is at a standstill, why? Why? By the gods, there *is* a third wave after all, only on Rufinus' side, a weaker one than the first two, but it could still decide the issue, with its fresh impact.

"Attention, Twenty-third!"

Another arrow, Silanus is wounding off dozens of them and his cheek is bleeding. At last the damn sword is coming out of its sheath.

"Twenty-third—attack! The signal, Tubas!"

Come on, now's the time, this is the direction, down on their left flank, never mind Rufinus' men, let them gather themselves as best they can, come on, you! What's that ass Silanus grinning about? Look on me, Helios, here I go—hell, the horse is falling, who invented horses?—loose, loose, keep your limbs loose, said Damon—but here's Silanus to keep one from falling, one lands on one's feet and by some miracle there is another horse, and six, eight hands are helping one back into the saddle— "Attack, the Twenty-third!" But they *are* attacking: the fall has made one drift back in the general uproar and rows of Roman helmets are in front now. Spears hiss louder than arrows, but then these Germans are throwing young masts, there they go, long-haired, snarling animals, masses of them, howling like wolves.

What on earth am I doing here?—what would Plato—? That was a near one, only just—mustn't lose sight of the

whole manœuvre, but how can anybody see anything, here's Silanus thrashing about like mad, a naked arm with a sword two yards long is lifted over him— Have *I* done that?— It bleeds and a face gets pale and the sword tumbles down and Silanus roars something—and here's another German running like a mad bull and stopped quite suddenly by an arrow sticking out of his throat—what's over there?—they're running in the wrong direction, the Germans are running in the wrong direction: they are *fleeing*—right into the hail of arrows and stones from Sallust's auxiliaries. Now here the cloud lifts, too—Roman armour, Roman helmets, where's the enemy? Off, with lightning speed, and getting away, too, and here is Marcellus, cool as a cucumber, he says something, what does he say?—can't hear—

And suddenly Julian knew he could not hear it because everything had gone silent. The silence after the uproar was more deafening than the uproar had been. It was deadly.

Here's Sallust coming up, why is he beaming? What's there to beam about? Did he say "victory"?

Yes, he did. He said it half a dozen times. So this is victory.

What a strangely unimpressive thing it is. . . . We are still here, the enemy is gone, so we have won.

The road and the meadows are full of bodies, and here—here lies Rufinus, and he is dead—a sword has cut through his helmet, his mouth is open and his poor eyes are staring into the void. Poor old obstinate Rufinus—have I sent you into this? So wretched you look now and yet solemn in a strange way, as well you should—aren't they clear to you now, the mysteries we are all exploring? That ugly sword cut has driven a piece of your helmet deep into your brain, and so the soul left the destroyed instrument, the lute is broken and the lute player has thrown it away: there it lies.

Victory . . .

Marcellus' losses had been very heavy—three hundred and fifty dead and over six hundred wounded was the grand total reported. But the Eleventh and Fifteenth had borne the brunt of the fighting and he could not be blamed for anything. Rather Julian blamed himself for not having sent out patrols on both flanks—which would have made a surprise attack at least far more difficult for the enemy. He said so quite openly.

Marcellus shrugged his shoulders. "One 'can't think of everything. By the way, Cæsar—what on earth made you think of, that peculiar double-swing movement with which you came to my aid? It's entirely unorthodox—"

"I know, I know—" Julian felt suitably abashed. "It—it was just an idea—"

One could hardly tell Marcellus that one had had that idea in Milan, when the troops had assembled on the parade ground in the form of a crescent, to listen to the Emperor's speech.

anted to try that one out," he added, truthfully.
taking the enemy into the jaws of a pincer—"ave him a queer look, but did not say anything.

CHAPTER XXV

Helena was jabbing stitches into an embroidery pattern, as she usually did in the evening. The little room was spotlessly clean—there was even a bunch of early spring flowers in a slightly chipped vase.

She has changed,* thought Julian. Especially in these last few weeks she has changed—much. It was incredible what pregnancy did to women. Man could never quite understand it. Women became flowering trees, sprouting plants, parts of nature itself.

Her face was drawn and pale—her body was swollen and when she walked, her movements were slow and cautious. And yet—even so she was still beautiful, in a different way: the abundance of Demeter rather than the aloof virginity of Athene.

Thank Helios that her women had retired—even Lady Lupina who never stopped fussing over her and seemed to regard everybody as an intruder, not excluding the husband of her mistress. . . .

These had been quiet days, relatively at least: only routine work, although on a grand scale. Spring was in the offing and with it the return to action after a period of hibernation, here in Sens.

It had not been an altogether quiet period, though: only six weeks ago they had actually been besieged by a German force of almost twenty thousand, in this absurd little town with its ramshackle walls and half-destroyed houses.

"Damn Marcellus," said Julian.

A thin smile appeared on Helena's face. "You haven't got over that yet, have you?"

"I never shall. Laziness, inefficiency, rudeness, lack of skill, even lack of courage I can forgive—but not treachery. And it was treachery."

"I suppose so," said Helena, without looking up.

"He knew we were being besieged," went on Julian. "I sent him fifty messengers, singly and in twos and threes. And

there he was, sixty miles away, with ten thousand men—and did not budge. He *wanted* us to be killed.”

“He had orders not to move, perhaps,” said Helena quietly.

Julian laughed. “I daresay he had. He’s the fifth of my commanders suddenly to produce special instructions directly from Milan. And I am called Cæsar.”

“You *are* Cæsar,” said Helena. “You have a right to the name.”

“Have I? I haven’t done anything yet. I couldn’t do anything. Your brother told me: ‘There’s unrest in Gaul—go and restore the peace’—he did not say: ‘Gaul is overrun by tens of thousands of barbarians; go and collect the scattered remnants of our armies, weld them into a fighting force, and drive the barbarians out.’ He said: ‘Everything will be done to make your task easy.’ But instead of sending me money to pay the troops, he demands money from me—taxes—and instructs my commanders directly—”

“I know,” said Helena.

“No one can wage war under such conditions. When it comes to the decisive battle, sometime in the next three months—how can I trust Marcellus? As for the other senior commander I was promised: Barbatio is still in Italy, having a very good time. One does feel such a fool. . . .”

“I know,” said Helena patiently.

“At least I have the satisfaction that the Emperor himself can sleep quietly,” said Julian bitterly. “He’s been in Rome for a ceremonial visit: with an army, a quarter of which would be sufficient to drive the last German out of Gaul. But he must have them for the Persian war, I suppose . . . unless he accepts the Grand King’s conditions. . . .”

“What are the conditions?”

Julian laughed. “Sapor is a megalomaniac. You know he’s sent envoys with a letter written in liquid gold on purple silk. It’s a masterpiece of arrogance: ‘We, Sapor, King of Kings, Brother of the Sun and the Moon,’ and so on. He gives Constantius the good advice that he should keep only those parts of the Roman Empire which he can defend: in short he demands half a dozen Roman provinces.”

“Is Constantius going to accept that?” asked Helena, jabbing away at her embroidery.

“How do I know? But I don’t think so. He can’t accept it and still call himself Emperor of the Roman world.”

Helena’s eyes gleamed suddenly. “There is only one answer to Sapor,” she said fiercely. “And that is: ‘I shall make peace with you in your own capital, when my legions have

taken it.' And it should be written with the blood of Sapor's envoys on their own skin."

Julian laughed, a little shakily. "I didn't know that you could be so—bloodthirsty, dearest."

"I'm not bloodthirsty," said the pale woman, quite calm again now. "I just loathe the impudence of barbarians. You wouldn't tolerate it, Julian, would you?"

But he did not seem to listen. "Do you know what they call me at Court, Helena? Victorinus—the little conqueror—because so far, thank Helios, I've had only victories to report."

"You are angry because they are right, aren't you?"

"I suppose so—it is quite true that I haven't done anything big yet so far—we've had skirmishes, but no battle. We took Cologne—but it was undefended. The barbarians are where they came from—beyond the Rhine—but they withdrew of their own accord—we did not beat them. Yes, you are right and they are right, at Court: I am a *little* conqueror. . . ."

"Patience," said Helena. "Your time will come."

"If only I could get rid of Marcellus—I *must* be able to rely on my commanders. I can't fight the Alemanni, the Franks, my own senior officers, and—"

"And the Emperor—"

"Helena!"

"Well— isn't that the situation? He's jealous of you—he will be more so after a real victory—"

"He's your brother."

"You are my husband."

He went over to her and lifted her little chin. "Strange girl," he said. "Shall I ever understand you?"

Calm eyes, a little sleepy. "Sometimes you are such a child, Julian—"

"Am I? Why?"

"You've married Constantius' sister—and yet you talk as though the Emperor were a superior being—"

"She was watching the effect of her words carefully. His smile was a little forced, when he said: "Well— isn't he?"

Her body stiffened. "You too are of the blood, aren't you? And you are young—and healthy. Constantius is not old—but his health is not too good, I hear—"

"Helena! You can't mean—"

"If anything should happen to him—there would be only one male member of the family left, wouldn't there?"

Now she was smiling and he stared into her face as a man might stare at a mirage.

"At least, at present it is so," whispered Helena.

"What do you mean?"

She put her embroidery down. "Do you know how Sapor came to be the Grand King of Persia?" she asked softly. "It's a strange story, and a very wonderful one. When his father Hormouz died, he was still unborn, in his mother's womb. But the Magi of the Court prophesied that the Queen would give birth to a *son*, stronger and more powerful than his father had been and their prophecy was timely: for no female child can rule on the throne of Persia, and already certain Princes of the Royal Family of Sassan were claiming their rights to the throne, and civil war seemed to be imminent."

Julian's attention was growing. "And then? What happened?"

"The Queen, in her Royal bed, was carried to the sacred Coronation Chamber in the midst of the Palace. There she was uncovered in the presence of all the Satraps. A diadem was placed on her belly, and the Satraps, prostrated, adored the Majesty of their Sovereign yet unborn."

"A marvellous tale," said Julian hoarsely.

"A true tale," said Helena.

Their eyes met. At that moment Lady Lupina entered, "Tribune Sallust insists on seeing the Cæsar," she announced with ill-concealed indignation.

"Sallust? Now?" Julian looked at Helena.

"Let him come in," said she eagerly, and the voluminous lady withdrew.

Sallust came in quickly, his face flushed. "Great news, Cæsar—my apologies for the intrusion, Princess—"

"Speak up, man," said Helena. "What is it?"

"The Master of the Horse, Severus, has arrived from Milan, with orders to replace the Legate Marcellus. He brings two thousand men—heavy cavalry—just what we needed, Sir!"

The young officer's face fairly beamed, but so did Julian's.

"Marcellus is recalled, then?"

"Yes, Sir. I know all this unofficially, of course. Severus told me in confidence. He's asking for official audience. But there's more to come, Sir. You are given full command—all special powers are cancelled."

Julian took a deep breath. "At last," he said. "Thank you, Sallust—I shall be with you in a minute."

The young Tribune saluted, still beaming, and left.

"I must go, Helena—this is the most tremendous news—I can't understand what made the Emperor change his mind—"

"I wrote a letter to the Empress," said Helena, smiling

quietly. "I told her that Marcellus had endangered my child's life and my own—"

"Helios himself has given you to me, my dearest," cried Julian, and he kissed her pale, passive lips. "I must run now—two thousand men, heavy cavalry, just think of it! Why, it's the decisive thing—I shall be back soon, Helena—forgive me—"

He rushed out.

Helena, still smiling, laid both her hands on her belly; her fingers met in a queer gesture: as though forming an invisible diadem.

CHAPTER XXVI

"What I don't understand," said Oribasius, "is from where he got the ability to deal with the simple soldier—"

Menes, the physician, shrugged his shoulders. "One either has it or has not."

"I suppose so. . . ." For the hundredth time Oribasius suppressed the antipathy he felt for the smooth Egyptian with his bored airs and "refined" mannerisms. "It still amazes me," he went on, pursuing his own trend of thought and not at all interested in his fellow-physician's opinion. "He has been a monk in Cappadocia, a philosopher in Athens, a mystic in Ephesus—and now he is a general in Gaul, and from what one can see, a damned good one—that alone is amazing."

"There has not been much fighting—so far," said Menes.

"Still—one would think that the ordinary soldier'd be full of suspicion against a little intellectual like that—that he'd a thousand times rather have a man like the late Legate Rufinus or like old Severus—both men who have risen from the ranks—but no! They eat out of Cæsar's hand—they laugh at his speeches with their frequent quotations from the classics—they make fun of his riding and of his habit of soliloquising—but they'll follow him anywhere with blind confidence. I should know—I've given treatment to so many of them—"

"You certainly have," said Menes suavely. "Sometimes one would think that my learned colleague is an ordinary army physician, and not the Cæsar's personal medical adviser."

Oribasius nodded. "I know. I should be at the Cæsar's disposal day and night; and as, most fortunately, his health is excellent, I would earn my salary for doing exactly nothing."

No, friend Menes—that's no good for my father's son. I want work."

"It is a different conception," began Menes.

"Certainly," interrupted Oribasius. "To you the ordinary man means nothing. You saw the Princess this morning?"

"Naturally—" the Egyptian smiled—"I pay my visit to her every morning—as you know."

"I admire your sense of duty," said Oribasius in his rudest tone, and he walked out of the room. "I'm unjust," he thought. "And I'm unjust because I dislike him. And I dislike him because he sees her every morning. What a fool I am."

Exactly five minutes later he found himself in Helena's ante-room, asking to be allowed to see the Princess. Lady Lupina sniffed, as usual, and waddled into the adjacent room. When she came back: "The most gracious Princess will see you."

He had a sudden feeling of gratitude, as though the fat lady had spoken in his favour. "Fool," he thought again. "Triple fool."

Helena was reading a letter when he came in. "Wait," she said without looking up. "Don't disturb me—I want to finish reading. Sit down." He obeyed, thankful for the time in which he could look at the finely cut profile. She had given up powdering her hair with gold dust lately, and her condition had taken away much of its lustre. And yet—and yet—

She put the letter down. "Menes has already been here to see me," she said sullenly. "There's nothing wrong with me except that I'm bored. Don't argue with me—I know it can't be helped. The Cæsar *had* to leave. Aren't you lucky, not to be a woman, Oribasius! A woman is always waiting for something. No wonder women are so dull. . . ."

"The Cæsar may be back in a few weeks," Oribasius ventured to say.

"I doubt it. I know very little about these things, but this time—"

"You mustn't worry too much, Princess," warned Oribasius.

"Oh, it isn't that—I'm not worried about him. He'll win. And he'll come back. But I wanted him to be here when—when the child comes."

"But that's another two months, at least," exclaimed Oribasius cheerfully. "He'll be back a long time before that."

"I hope so—but I'm not sure. . . ." The little foot stamped. "It's hellish not to be sure of anything, Oribasius—I admit it myself."

"You are sure that he'll win, anyway, aren't you?" grinned the physician. "And so am I—and so are his soldiers. I've just said to Menes: 'It's an extraordinary thing. One simply can't imagine that he can be beaten.'"

"And what did Menes say?"

"Oh, he—he's an eel. He talks a lot, but he never says anything."

Helena smiled. "You do dislike each other, you two—like fire and water."

"I had a bit of a quarrel with him," confessed Oribasius. "He told me off for looking after the troops, instead of regarding myself as the Cæsar's physician only."

"And aren't you?"

"Yes," said Oribasius gravely. "And that's why I am looking after his soldiers. The Cæsar is Cæsar only because he is the head of an army; his army is the body, of which he is the head. I'm not a specialist in diseases of the head. I'm giving treatment to Cæsar's own body, by looking after his men."

The Princess was amused. "The bishops say the Church is the Mystic Body of Christ," she said. "Have you become a mystic, then, Oribasius?"

"Heaven forbid," exclaimed the physician. "Mysticism does not agree with me. I most strongly object to that—sort of thing. For myself, of course, only," he added.

"The Cæsar is so often holding forth about it," Helena's fingers were playing with her embroidery now; it was still unfinished. "I'm afraid I shall never quite understand it, Oribasius; but maybe there is something in it. How is one to know? I wouldn't tell anyone else but you: but I brought a sacrifice to Helios, with him, before he went."

"He's made you believe in Helios then—"

"No—I don't think so. But he thought it would be lucky for him if I joined him, so I did. An hour earlier we had been at Mass, with all the officers—"

Oribasius shook his head. "We used to have a great many gods and goddesses in Greece in the olden times. And yet people were worried that they might have left one out, without knowing, and that this would infuriate him—or her. So they build an altar to the unknown god—"

"Not a bad idea. I suppose—"

"I'm afraid—it's a bit like betting on every horse in the race," said Oribasius with a shrug. "Later, when St. Paul came to Athens, he—"

"—claimed the altar for his own God," remembered Helena. "I know—I know: I had to learn it all."

"A shrewd man, Paul," nodded the physician. "But he wasn't very successful in Athens."

"You still don't believe in any sort of god, apparently—"

"No, Princess, and I never shall. Contrariwise, you believe in all the gods, it seems—"

"I believe in Julian," said Helena. "I believe in my child. And one day—tell me, Oribasius, nothing can happen to my child, if I'm cautious these last two months—can it?"

He raised his head. "What on earth makes you say that?"

"Never mind—there is nothing to be afraid of, is there?"

Yes, it was fear—a deep, ugly fear, somewhere in a corner of her mind. "There is nothing to worry about, Princess—to the best of my knowledge."

"Ah—it's a pity Cherubaal is not here—"

"Who is Cherubaal?"

"Don't you know? The Emperor's astrologer."

The physician made a wry face.

"He's a very clever man," said Helena slowly. "He's been almost always right. I wish he'd tell me—"

Oribasius took a deep breath. "With all due or undue respect to the Emperor's stargazer: this is a medical problem and there I can claim that I know what I'm talking about. No need to worry, Princess."

Helena's pale face showed a rigid obstinacy. "You don't understand, Oribasius. You can't understand. . . . It's not only that—everything will be all right, when the time comes. It is—the future. My son's future—why, he may be born crippled—or blind—or weak and unfit to rule—he—"

She stopped abruptly.

"You haven't said anything of that to Menes, have you?" asked Oribasius hoarsely. She turned her head away.

"Of course not—why should I?"

There is every reason why you should *not*, thought Oribasius. His hands were icy, all his nerves were tingling. He had suddenly seen a new and terrifying aspect of his goddess—and he who had tried to dispel her fears, felt more afraid than she had ever been. If Menes gets an inkling of this ambition, he'll report to Court immediately, he thought. And that means that I shall have to kill Menes—in order to save her life. . . .

"Bad news, Cæsar," said the grey-haired Legate Severus, on entering the tent.

Julian nodded. "I know. Barbatio—"

"Yes, Cæsar."

"He's allowed himself to be beaten?"

"Worse than that, Cæsar."

"He's been captured, then?"

"Worse still—he's withdrawn altogether, with his entire army."

"He's always been a swine," said Julian coolly. "I told you he was up to no good. I never counted on him, really."

But that was not quite true. Barbatio had—at last—arrived at the most eastern part of the front, near Basle, with almost thirty thousand men: more than double that of Julian's own army. He had been expected to cross the Rhine and carry the war into the enemy's own country. Julian's plan had been to do likewise near Saverne and to meet Barbatio in the heart of Germany. Now the whole plan was upset, and what was worse, the Alemanni were almost bound to recross the Rhine themselves, now that the major part of the Roman army was out of the field. He would have to face their attack alone. . . .

Severus knew what was going on in Julian's mind and Julian knew that he knew. But in these things his philosophical training gave him a calm and self-assuredness that never ceased to impress the military.

"Sit down, Severus—and give me all the details you have."

They were bad enough—they were shocking. Barbatio's attempt to cross the Rhine had been a very half-hearted one. When the enemy sent a few mobile columns over, to pillage the countryside, the Roman commander did not interfere. Then Agenaric, one of the German leaders, had attacked him at night, and Barbatio had allowed himself to be beaten—it was not a decisive battle by any means, just a daredevil attack which came off beyond the boldest German expectations. Whereupon Barbatio—with ninety per cent of his army intact—decided to withdraw, to put his army into "winter quarters"—in July—and himself travelled straight to Milan to report directly to the Emperor. Before doing so, he had burnt most of the ships in which his army was to have crossed, and all his stores and equipment.

All this Severus knew from a few hundred men who had refused to be sent into hibernation and had gone on to join the Cæsar's little army. Barbatio himself had not thought it necessary to inform the Cæsar of his plans—if one could call such ignominious treachery a plan.

"Fine," said Julian. To his own astonishment he really felt almost elated about it. Perhaps it was because it had always been an intolerable thought to fight side by side with his brother's executioner.

"The Alemanni will cross in a few days, of course," he said. "But where? Just as well I've established the fortifications at Saverne. They're not likely to march north far

enough for us to circumvent them. They'll rather land south—near Strasbourg—I want you to send out patrols, Severus—they're to look for any accumulation of boats and rafts."

"Yes, Cæsar."

"Strasbourg—give me that map over there, will you?—thank you."

He studied it for a while. "Send for Ammian, Severus. He's got a clever man on his staff, a specialist in map-making. I want the most exact map made of this sector here—d'you see? Every rivulet, hill, forest, or village may become important."

"Very well, Cæsar."

When Severus had stamped out, Julian sank for a while into a deep reverie. There were things of which that honest old fighter did not know: of which no one knew here in Gaul: Helena alone, perhaps, sensed them. There was no doubt in his mind that Barbatio had not acted like this of his own accord . . . he wouldn't dare. He'd had his instructions, just as Marcellus had, to whom the Emperor, on his arrival in Milan, had given a new command. It was all part of a scheme. The Empress was the only influence working for him at Court. Mardonius had no real power. And for that one voice, the voice of a thoroughly good, kind-hearted woman, there were a hundred warning, whispering, hissing voices, all playing up to Constantius' innate suspiciousness. "What if Cæsar wins? What if the Cæsar becomes too powerful . . . ?"

It couldn't be helped. It had to be borne, unbearable as it was that the ruler of the Roman Empire sought to impede his own representative in his fight for the Roman Empire. What mattered was that it did not influence one's mind. One had to do one's duty to Rome, and the gods would help the man who so firmly believed in them. Nothing else mattered. Certainly not personal ambition. No. Not at all, though it would be lovely to come back to Helena with a real, a crushing victory. If only all went well. . . .

Julian rode slowly alongside the endless column of men on the march: all the cavalry was on the right, all the infantry on the left. There was no need for special precautions, at the present moment. He knew *exactly* where the enemy was, and so did every single man whom he passed on his white charger. They acclaimed him everywhere.

"Hi, little philosopher—have you thought it all out, by now?"

"Going to give us another speech?"

"What's the theme to-day?"

"The theme is: 'How to whip the Germans.'" laughed Julian.

"Hi, Cæsar—got any money?"

"Just as much as you have, Vatinius."

"Holy Christ—he remembers my name!" exclaimed the legionary.

"Of course I do," said Julian. "You were the first man to enter the southern gate of Cologne."

Vatinius, as proud as a peacock, forgot all about the money.

But Julian didn't. Within the last four months he had had no money sent out to him to pay the troops. That, too, was part of the scheme. . . . He rode on with a frown.

A messenger from an intelligence patrol arrived and reported to Sallust, who was riding just behind his master. "Are they all over the river now?" asked Julian in a low voice.

"Yes, Cæsar."

"Thirty?"

"About thirty-five, all told, Cæsar."

Thirty-five thousand Germans—and he had little more than thirteen thousand. . . .

"Hi, Cæsar—can't you lend me your horse?"

He looked up. The "Petulants"—Gallic auxiliaries—were always the cheekiest of the lot, but sturdy fighters, despite their excitability. "No," said Julian. "I can't lend it to you yet. I'm still busy learning how to ride it."

A roar of laughter greeted this bit of self-deprecation. They liked the slim little man and his funny ways. Stories were told at the watch-fires of his wit, his cleverness, his quick repartee; he was never embarrassed, he always knew a way out of a tight corner. Old Rufinus, who had died in the first skirmish, had been quite right: the puppy knew what he was doing. Cheerful enough, he seemed, too. Probably had it all taped again. . . .

Thirty-five to thirteen. Bad odds. Almost three to one.

There was another message. The Germans had camped, as soon as they had crossed the Rhine.

Julian threw a quick look at Sallust, who showed all his teeth in a huge grin. Julian had told him, days in advance, that the Germans were going to camp immediately after the crossing. "How can you know that, Cæsar? They may go on straight south—in fact, they should!"

"I'll prevent that."

"How?"

"You'll see."

And now it had happened.

"I still don't understand how you could have known that, Cæsar?"

"Friend," said Julian, "there are two ways of becoming stronger than your enemy: one by becoming stronger yourself—the other by weakening him."

"Aristotle?" asked Sallust respectfully.

Julian laughed, intensely flattered. "Aristotle wrote about logic—he did not invent it. It's just my own bit of common sense."

"And which of the ways did you choose, Cæsar?"

"Both. You remember that I had our men equipped with the best armour money could buy: I even bribed some of the manufacturers in Massilia to give us priority over the deliveries for the Persian war—"

Sallust leaned back in the saddle and guffawed.

"So that was the first way," grinned Julian. "If I've got to fight against numerical superiority, I must try to make my men invulnerable. And the Germans are badly equipped, as we know: wooden or leather shields, almost without metal stiffening, spear blades as often as not flint instead of metal, and clumsily fixed, swords artlessly forged, armour practically non-existent. . . . They are stronger, physically, than our men, but they tire more easily, and they need far more strength in order to land a really dangerous blow or thrust against an armoured legionary."

Sallust nodded. "What about the other way—weakening the enemy. And I still have no idea how you could know that the Germans were going to camp after the Rhine crossing."

"In order to weaken the enemy one should play up to his main weaknesses," lectured the little philosopher. "Now if there is anything the Germans can do still better than fighting, it's eating and drinking. They can do it for hours on end. They just don't stop, they go on and on. I've seen some of our prisoners doing it. In the end, they let themselves fall backward and sleep; usually they snore, too."

"Well?"

"Well—the day before yesterday that new food transport was announced, you remember?"

"Yes—we didn't have time to wait for its arrival. More than four thousand—"

"I know the figures. Well, I gave orders to friend Severus, to direct the supply column, not to our camp, but to a point over there—Where is that map?—here, see?"

"But—that's where the enemy is crossing."

"Yes, almost exactly there, though not quite. They're bound to find it, but it doesn't look so deliberate."

"You wanted them to find it?"

"I did."

"To gorge themselves with our food?"

"And our wine, yes. Oh, they're having a wonderful time, our dear little Alemanni over there."

Sallust sat bolt upright on his horse. "You had such a long conference with the camp physicians. You didn't have those stores poisoned, by any chance—did you?"

"Only a little," said Julian ruefully. "I should have thought of it earlier—we didn't have enough stuff. But even so—there's quite a bit of mandrake and henbane and nightshade in the wine, at least: it won't kill them, I'm afraid. But it will give some of them a frightful bellyache and others will feel exceedingly sleepy. It's not my idea, really," he added hastily. "I found something rather similar in Frontinus' book."

"Well, by all the devils—" said Sallust and he gulped heavily.

"Keep quiet about it," warned Julian. "I don't want that story to be spread. In no circumstances must you tell Ammianus Marcellinus about it."

"Why Ammian, specially?"

"He's writing a book about this campaign. He's not at all bad at it. Wouldn't be surprised if he finds a publisher. And I don't want him to say that we won the battle of Gaul simply by poisoning the enemy's food."

Two hours later Severus rode up. "We have another hour's marching, at least, before the enemy can see us, Cæsar, and the troops will be tired by then. Don't you think we should camp now?"

Julian hated the very idea. He was as tense as a bowstring, checking and rechecking on his battle plan. But the mood of the men was important.

"Do they want it, Severus?"

"Not yet—but they soon will, I think."

"It could be fatal. To-morrow morning the Germans would have regained most of their strength. If only one could fill the troops with the same tenseness, the same ardent wish to get it over. . . .

"Perhaps you're right, Severus—we shall see," said Julian to Sallust's surprise. "Let them deploy in a semi-circle. I'm going to ask them."

Severus galloped off, to give the necessary orders to his tribunes.

Sallust gave the Cæsar a questioning look. But Julian's face was impassive.

It took all the skill of Roman drill and training to deploy

the army as quickly as their impatient commander desired. Four horses had been tied together and layers of rugs spread over their backs.

Julian climbed up to this improvised rostrum and looked round. The sea of men in armour greeted him with cheerful shouts.

"My friends," he cried. "The enemy is only about an hour's march away. He can't either see or hear us yet. But if we march on any further, he would and he might then get the idea to attack us—he sometimes does get ideas. Now you poor fellows have been on the march for hours: it isn't funny to be attacked, when one's only wish is really to have a bit of dinner and a sound night's sleep—"

He made a pause. The men were looking at each other sheepishly. What was the little Cæsar driving at?

"There is, of course, also another theory," said the little Cæsar. "And that is: why wait until these Germans get ideas? Why not attack *them* instead—" Suddenly his voice grew in strength and his eyes began to sparkle. "March up that last hour, and force them to give battle right away, and beat them—and *then* have dinner, in peace and contentedness—and a *safe* night's sleep. Get the whole thing over in a few more hours—"

Again a short pause. "The Germans, you see, are exactly like a toothache: the longer you wait, the worse it gets."

They liked that one. They laughed.

"Maybe it's not a bad idea to go and get it over," cried Julian. "But then, *I* haven't been marching on my flat feet as the infantry has. *I've* got no blisters—at elast not on my feet."

They roared.

"I really don't know what to do," shouted Julian. "You see, if we get a hiding, it'll be all my fault: the rash, impetuous, presumptuous little philosopher who wouldn't give his troops a night's rest—"

"No! Not your fault! You're all right, little Cæsar! You're all right!"

"But if you feel that you *can* do it—if you want to put in that little bit of extra strength that I know you've all got—and if you have confidence in me—"

"Yes! Yes! Now, Cæsar! Not to-morrow, Cæsar—now! Go ahead! Let's get it over!"

"Well, if that's how you feel, my friends—then with the help of all good powers, we're going to show these flaxheads where they belong: they didn't want to stay behind the Rhine. We don't want them to stay here in Gaul. Therefore we shall give them plenty of room to live in: *in* the Rhine!"

They bellowed, barked, screamed, thundered their enthusiasm.

Julian, arms akimbo, looked about and nodded. "Very well, then—as you want it so: *now!*"

And he jumped off his improvised rostrum. "March-formation, Severus—quickly. Off we go."

Severus grinned, nodded and started giving orders.

"The jokes were terrible, I'm afraid," apologised Julian to the Tribune Ammianus Marcellinus. "I hope you haven't written them down. They've helped, though—hear that?—they are singing. . . ."

A grey cloud was rolling forward from the German camp, growing and growing.

"That's it," said Sallust, and Julian shifted in the saddle, irritated by the man's habit of stating the obvious. He was annoyed also because he saw that his reserves were not holding their exact place, yonder, at the edge of the little forest—they were placed too near to the main road. If things went wrong, they would find it very easy to use the road for quicker flight. But, then, he'd given the command there to Ammian and he was a reliable man.

The cloud grew—now a faint thundering noise could be heard.

Cavalry—impossible yet to say how many, impossible to say where they were going to attack: it was either the centre or the right wing—his own wing. Old Severus had the left and sturdy little Aufidius, the former commander of Rheims, the centre.

Another cloud was forming towards the left—but it was moving much more slowly. So that was their first idea: cavalry attack against the Roman right flank—infantry attack against centre and left. The formation, as usual would be the wedge, their ancient formation, which their supreme god, Wodan, was supposed to have taught them. They'd never changed that and probably never would. Attack in the form of a wedge—split the enemy's front wide open—against that the obvious tactics were: defence in depth. For that, however, one needed more men—it was the main trouble that one could not put up more than three lines against them. The speed of the cavalry cloud was terrific—mandrake, henbane and nightshade didn't seem to have upset them very much—

Glittering flashes appeared in the cloud and the thundering noise grew. It was time to act. He nodded to Sallust's questioning glance and the Tribune galloped away. Immedi-

ately afterwards the first three thousand men—Roman heavy cavalry—began to move, slowly, in perfect formation, a giant stag beetle, heavily armoured.

Julian kept his place with another six hundred men—heavy cavalry. Their leader, Præfect Florentius, a slim, exceedingly well-mannered gentleman with a taste for silk tunics and Syrian perfumes, rode up.

"Quite amazing, Cæsar," he said. "The best cavalry attack I've seen so far—" He tried to be casual, but Julian saw that he was pale and there were beads of perspiration on his forehead.

The rhythmic thunder of the cavalry cloud had become a continuous roar. The Roman cavalry was cantering now—and Julian saw the commanders lift their swords—the sign for full gallop.

"By all the saints," cried Florentius. "Look at them—it's not only cavalry—it's a mixed attack—there are men hanging on the manes of the horses—they must be wizards—"

"It's an old trick of theirs," Julian was going to say—but then he saw that Florentius had lost his nerve completely.

"Back," screamed the Præfect. "Give orders, Cæsar—we can't stop a mixed attack that way—back all of you—"

And he spurred his horse in the direction of the main road.

"Are you mad?" shouted Julian.

But already the six hundred wavered—fifty, eighty followed their leader—more—still more—

"Stop, you rascals—" Julian drew his sword and rode right into their dissolving formation. "Stop, I say!"

But they pressed on and on, the little Cæsar's horse was forced backward, turned, and there he was, fleeing in the middle of a compact, snorting, foaming mass of cavalry. "Damn you—oh, damn you, you absurd cowards!" No escape. Flight. Never in his life had he felt so furious. He laid about with his sword, wounding a man here, a horse there, and got himself breathing space.

There they were, his six hundred, about three hundred in front of him and the rest behind, all fleeing—

Julian bent over his horse and dug the spurs in. It shot forward and he caught up with the first half.

"Follow me!" he screamed at the top of his voice. "Follow me—or I'll have you all impaled!"

And he rode on, brandishing his sword like a madman. They saw the purple cloak, of course, and they were accustomed to obey. If only the horse didn't stumble. If only one could ride better. If only they followed—by bloody Helios, it was too stupid for words—a semi-circle now—are

they coming?—they are hesitating—more sword-brandishing—screaming—cursing—there, I almost fell off—oh, damn these cat-livered bastards—come on you! Only one thing to do, ride on—turn—turn still more—mustn't ride into Aufidius' formation—now it's the right direction, there's the cloud, good gods, it looks like the Christian hell, screams, hooves clanking, arrows—are they coming?

Wild whoops of joy—yes, they were coming, the whole damned cursed six hundred of them were coming up behind him—in we go—this is where I become a damned hero—who's that?—down with you—don't stumble, you infernal brute of a horse—up with you—

When Sallust caught up with his master, he found him sitting in the middle of a group of wounded men; he was in a state of complete exhaustion, but still screaming curses—

"Here, Cæsar—have a sip—"

The wine ran down his throat like liquid fire.

"Never seen such nonsense," spluttered Julian. "Have you seen that?—These eunuchs—these women—"

"You came just in time to save the whole wing, Cæsar—"

"Have I?—Well, that's what I'm here for, aren't I?—Let me see now—"

Yes, the cloud was rolling back—but in the centre the other cloud had attacked, and there was a third one, far away, in full deployment against Severus.

"I'll have another sip—thank you, Sallust. Now—get me some order into these rascals— I think the time has come to form the right side of the pincer. . . ."

Out of the silent forest came a giant. He was naked, but for the wolf skins wrapped around his loins. His beard was red and hung, two-forked, down to his hairy chest. He carried a huge spear.

"Don't shoot," ordered Julian, and he tore the bow out of an overzealous Numidian archer's hands. "That's a chief—I want him alive."

The giant wore no insignia of any kind—but there was something regal about the way he held his head and the fearlessness of his walk. Two other men came out of the forest and now three more, five more, twenty.

"Lay down your arms," commanded Julian in Latin.

The giant sighed. Then, with a swift gesture, he broke the heavy spear over his knee, and threw the parts away. Immediately the others followed suit. Slowly they approached.

"A bit of luck," whispered Sallust. "That's Chnôdomâr—their king—"

"Thought so. Well—he's seven foot after all."

At six paces' distance the German stopped. "You—have won a battle—Emperor," he said in halting Latin.

A wave of whispering went through the tightly packed rows of Roman soldiers. Julian became very pale.

"No, I'm not the Emperor," he said in a loud voice. "I'm the Emperor's commander in Gaul: Cæsar Julian."

The giant shrugged his huge shoulders. "This morning—I was king. Now I am prisoner. You—Cæsar—to-morrow: what you be?"

At least fifty men had come out of the little forest—the faithful followers of the king, whose special oath forced them to share everything with him—even death or slavery.

"You are King Chnodomar," said Julian.

"I—was: now—only Chnodomar."

"Tell me—Rome had a treaty with you Alemanni—you were to keep the peace, over there, beyond the Rhine. Why did you break it?"

The giant laughed. "Treaty is good to-day—bad to-morrow. Keep to-day—break to-morrow. Treaty—pah!" He spat contemptuously. "We—Alemanni," he said, "sons of god Donar—Donar, son of Wodan—"

"There you are," muttered Julian to Sallust. "There's another son of God for you—very unlike the Nazarene, I should say—"

"Donar very great god," said Chnodomar in his rumbling voice. His eyes flashed. "He throw hammer—so!" And he made a gesture so vehement and wild that Sallust instinctively thrust his shield in front of Julian's body. But the giant had no weapon.

"Donar throw hammer," he repeated. "And he say: 'As far as hammer flies, earth—mine.' And hammer flies—flies over all earth—all earth belong Donar. Since then—we have right to take earth—we Donar's children. We take it."

"Not as long as I live, you won't," said Julian, frowning.

Again the giant laughed. "You live—how long? You die—I die—but peoples live. We always come back—always. Until earth belongs to Donar's children."

"Take that prophet of ill omen away," ordered Julian. "But treat him well."

He felt something like a chill going down his spine.

An hour later the last Numidian archers came back from the pursuit.

Most of them had not a single arrow left in their quivers.

The plain was full of Roman arms. Tents were shooting up like mushrooms. Strict orders had been given not to

touch the wine and food of the enemy—and about three thousand victims of poisoning had been found in the German camp.

"It is," said Sallust, "the most astonishing victory of the century. Do you know, Cæsar: we had only two hundred and forty-six killed, including four tribunes? The Alemanni lost over six thousand, and there are probably another two or three thousand dead in the Rhine—the Numidians had easy game when the Germans tried to get over—"

"Is Ammian all right?" asked Julian eagerly. "Yes? Oh, good. I want him to hear my report to the Emperor. They'll have to revise their opinion a bit at Court. I'm not a 'little victor' any more. . . . Orders of the day, Sallust: make a note. The army has done splendidly. But Florentius and his six hundred will appear on parade to-morrow dressed as women. . . ."

"Cæsar—this will—"

"No comment, Sallust. The army will have twenty-four hours' rest. Then I shall do what I have sworn to do, when I entered Gaul—"

"What, Cæsar?"

"I shall cross the Rhine—just as the great Julius did. We are going to pay a visit to Donar's children—in Donar's own country. I want them to end that habit of aggression—once and for all!"

CHAPTER XXVII

I can't sleep, thought Oribasius, changing side in bed for the sixth time. What on earth is the matter with me?—I can't sleep. He never got further than a state of dull dozing, and although he felt no pain, there was something that made him think for a while that he might have picked up a disease. It wouldn't be so surprising either. . . . There were quite a number of sick people, here in Treves—it was mostly due to the bad drinking water. Horrible town, Treves. They'd been far better off in Sens, but the Princess had insisted on going further north. "Let me at least give my husband a chance to be with me when my hour comes. . . ." But there wasn't much of a chance for that—although the hour was still about six or seven weeks ahead.

Julian had sent messengers with the news of his incredible victory at Strasbourg, and later of his campaign on the other side of the Rhine. But since then he had marched

north again, and no one knew where he was at the present moment. The Princess had smiled mysteriously—maybe he had told her something of his secret plans by letter.

If only one could sleep. . . .

Try again. . . .

But it was no good—and it wasn't because he was ill. Suddenly he knew that something was wrong—decidedly wrong. He felt it so strongly that he broke into perspiration all over.

When a fist hammered at his door, he was not even surprised. There was something wrong, and here it was. He got up and opened the door. It was Lady Marcia, a slender little woman, constantly bullied by that fat old dragon, Lady Lupina. She was as pale as a sheet and her breath came in gasps.

"Oribasius—you must come at once."

"What's happened?"

"Everything—it's all over—"

He flew into a rage. "By the Styx, woman, pull yourself together. Is she alive?"

"Yes—but—"

"Where is Menes? It's his night of watching—"

"He's gone—"

An icy hand pressed his heart.

"You'll tell me all about it on the way—come along. Stop! I'll take a few things with me. Start talking—in an orderly manner—from the beginning."

She talked—in gasps—like vomiting it was. She, Marcia, had had night service—Menes had been there—when the Princess had called out—they had gone into her room, both of them—there she was, rolling over in her bed, with her eyes flaming—in pain, terrible pains—Menes had given her water, but she couldn't drink—

"Couldn't drink?"

"No—her throat was afire, she said—her womb was afire—she was burning, she said—and then it happened—"

The child came—and it was dead—and the Mistress dying—Lady Lupina had run to fetch a priest and she, Marcia, had come here—

They were running now—down the stairs and out of the house, and across the street; it was not far, only a few minutes' run—

"Go on, woman—what did Menes do?"

But Marcia had broken into sobs and could not utter a sensible word.

He outran her, reached the house, pushed the guards aside—one of them almost stabbed him, recognising him in the last moment—and burst into the ante-room, where Lady

Lupina was on her knees, with tears streaming down her face. She was holding a small bundle, as though it were a treasure. He did not bother to ask her anything, but ran into the Princess' room.

There she was, in bed—the whole room was upside down, chairs upturned, a table, phials—

Oh, the poor little white face, the sunken eyes—

He grasped her thin hand, felt the pulse . . . listened to the heart.

"Princess—dearest Princess—how did it happen?"

The waxen lips formed the words. "Menes—said—if I—drink—the potion—I'll have—a son—must—have—a son—and now—"

There was a thin blueish foam on her lips.

His head whirled. Menes—and a potion—

"When did you take it?"

"Yesterday—morning—"

He groaned.

"Must—have—an heir," gasped Helena. "Throne—of—the world—my son—ah—"

She was dying. Menes knew his craft. There would be no heir—the Emperor could sleep quietly—she was dying.

"Leave us now, my son," said a calm, deep voice and, turning his head, the physician saw that there was a man standing quietly in a corner of the room: a tall, bearded man in the dark garb of a Christian priest. His first reaction was one of furious, overflowing rage.

"Who are you? What do you want?"

The tall man came a step nearer. "There is nothing you can do," he said gravely. "And there is much that I must do."

Dark, grey-bearded face. Eyes of a brilliance that seemed to lighten the room.

Oribasius took a step back. "I can't leave," he whispered. "I—I—can't."

The eyes went right through him. The huge head gave a slight nod.

Then the priest sat down beside the Princess' bed and began to speak. His voice was calm and very low; but it seemed to pervade the room like a soothing essence.

"My daughter, you have spoken to God in your pains, and God has heard you: He always does. What you have said, has been a confession. . . ."

"Throne—of the world—" murmured Helena. "Must have a son—"

Oribasius groaned. Why couldn't the damned priest let her die, without pestering her—she wasn't even really conscious—

"The throne of the world is awaiting your presence," said the priest, louder than before. "And the Son of all sons is sitting on it."

Clever priest, thought Oribasius bitterly. Shrewd priest. He's using the two words that matter to her—for his own purpose.

"Son—on the throne—of the world," said Helena. "Must—be—on the throne—of—"

"You will see Him," said the priest. "And you will love Him—"

Surely this was the grossest deception—he was making her believe that he was talking about *her* son, her own child, the wretched little bundle, outside, in Lady Lupina's arms. . . .

"And—will—he—love me?" asked Helena; her tone was that of a plaintive child.

"He will love you," answered the calm voice. "Much more than you could love yourself—"

Oribasius saw a smile born on her lips: the like he had never seen before. She became beautiful, so much so, that it tore his heart.

"I love him," she murmured. "Oh—I love him so much—"

"Of course you do," said the priest. "And you would never want to hurt Him—would you?"

"Oh, no—no—"

The priest made the sign of the cross over her. "Then I absolve thee from all thy sins, in the name of the Father—and the Son—and the Holy Ghost—"

Helena did not seem to hear him, but she was still smiling.

The priest began to pray in a low voice. Only from time to time could Oribasius hear a few words. ". . . have mercy on thee . . . everlasting life . . . in the unity of the Holy Spirit . . . a tranquil joy . . . give cheer to the soul Thou didst create."

Then the tone of his prayer changed, and he uttered ancient names as though to invoke them: ". . . all the Holy Angels and Archangels—all Holy Apostles and Evangelists—all Holy Martyrs—"

It was as though the room were filled with the invisible Presence—

Weak and confounded, Oribasius had grasped the curtain next to the door, to hold himself upright. His eyes were fixed on the face of the dying woman.

The priest got up and stretched out both his hands. Oribasius heard him say: "Go forth, Christian soul from this world—in the name of God, the Father Almighty, who cre-

ated thee—in the name of Jesus Christ, Son of the Living God, who suffered for thee—in the name of the Holy Spirit who was poured forth into thee—”

And at that moment she died, and Oribasius hid his face in his hands and cried like a child. An arm came to rest on his shoulders, and he found himself led out of the room.

In the ante-room the Lupina was still kneeling, her huge body shaken by convulsive sobs. Oribasius, through a mist of tears, saw that she was still clutching that bundle in her hands.

Did the priest guess what it was? Or did he know? He went over to her, and laid his hand on her head.

“Give it to me, my daughter.”

She obeyed without a murmur. When he added: “Don’t cry any more—she is happy now,” she stopped crying.

“I have no acolyte,” said the priest. “Will you come with me—to bury this?”

Oribasius nodded. It seemed quite impossible to say no to this man. He found himself trotting along beside him, taking three steps to every two of the priest’s. It was all quite wrong. He should have stayed in the house—and—obviously—the priest took him for a Christian. Maybe he was about to perform some ceremony or other, and someone who did not believe in anything— But somehow he felt that it didn’t matter at all and that all that mattered was to go with this man, this overpowering man who had taken command of everything, and whom everyone obeyed. Perhaps it was his stature that made one feel that one was a boy again, trotting alongside one’s father, wherever the father wanted to go.

The father wanted to go to the cemetery, and they reached it, walking silently, in a few minutes. The guardian bowed deeply and somehow that was not in the least surprising. They passed a number of graves, old and new—

“Here,” said the priest. “This is a suitable place.”

When the guardian arrived with a tiny coffin, that too seemed quite natural and the obvious thing. They waited until the man had dug a hole in the soft ground.

A fantastic idea crossed the physician’s mind. What if the child was alive? He had not seen it at all—it could not be so; of course it was quite out of question. But—

“Can I see it—before you—”

Silently the priest gave him the bundle. He unwrapped the towel—just one end of it—and gave the bundle back. The horrible little dead thing had not, could not have lived even to draw one breath.

The priest put it into the coffin as carefully as though it

were a holy relic and closed the cover. He prayed over it for a while, before he lifted the coffin and passed it on to the guardian, who deposited it into the soil.

They stood, watching the fertile black earth covering it.

"The throne of the world," said the priest and there was deep sadness in his voice.

"Why?" asked Oribasius between his teeth. "Why can such a thing happen, if there is a God and if He is perfect, as they say He is—"

"He is. But man is not. This is man's handiwork, not God's. If there was an immortal soul in this wretched little body—and we don't know that for sure in a case where there was no independent life—then God will take care of it."

Oribasius took a deep breath. "I'm a physician, Father—the sight of death is nothing new to me. But how anybody can believe that this cruel, merciless, feelingless Nature is due to the workings of an all-merciful all-feeling God—"

"When the greatest artist paints his masterpiece: is it perfect whilst he is still painting it, or only when it is finished? And God, the artist, is working not with brush and paint—but with living beings, and these living beings must have a free will of their own—"

"Why?"

"Because God, who is Love, wants love—and love must be spontaneous. Love enforced can never be love. We must have a free will in order to love God. But with free will we also have the power of choice: between love and not-love. Man once chose: to love *himself*, instead of God. Ever since, man has been unhappy."

"Your God is omniscient— He should have known that this would happen."

"He did. But there is no time where God lives. When He created man, He already knew that He himself would become man in order to redeem us after our failure."

Oribasius hung his head. "How can that be a comfort to a mother who has lost her child?"

"She has not lost it. It is only a temporary separation. And there can be no comfort to those without faith. For all of us must die."

"Then life on earth is bound to be unhappy—"

"Unless it is based upon love of God—yes. But if it is—never—"

Oribasius raised his head and looked the priest full in the face. "Tell me: is she—really happy now? You said so to her lady-in-waiting, but you may have said it to comfort her in her grief. Give me the truth—"

The moon was coming up over the roof of the small basil-

ica—just as it had done that night in Athens, when he had discussed the existence of God with Julian.

The priest's face was still in the shadow. His voice was almost as soft as a woman's as he said: "You were very fond of her, my son?"

"More than of anyone I know—Father."

"Can a human being be thoroughly evil—and yet be loved? And can God reject those who are loved? Is not all love of His own core?"

The priest seemed almost superhumanly tall—it was the moonlight, of course.

"You saw her die, my son. Was it the going of a woman on her way to eternal negation? Did she not die with the very name of love on her lips?"

"You—made her do it," stammered Oribasius.

"Such is the privilege of a Christian and a priest, my son. Now I must go. Peace be with thee."

Oribasius saw him walking along the small path between two rows of graves. His hair and beard were glistening like spun silver.

Slowly he too left the cemetery. When he reached the entrance, the priest was already out of sight. The guardian was standing in the doorway.

"Tell me, friend," said Oribasius. "You know the priest who came with me, don't you? Who is he?"

"Don't you know? He's an exile from very far away; he's been with us about two years now. He used to be the Metropolitan of Alexandria, in Egypt. His name is Athanasius."

Five weeks later Julian came back to Treves from the north, at the head of a victorious army. The Franks, too, had been utterly routed. Gaul was free from the enemy.

Arian priests had long since buried his wife in the crypt of their church.

CHAPTER XXVIII

Work, ceaseless work was the only thing to save Julian's sanity. Neither philosophy nor all the gods in their splendour would have been able to give him comfort: too abstract, too colourless was the verdict that the chosen instrument of Helios was destined to stand alone. . . . Work helped—work for the State, and—secretly—for his faith. Gaul was free—but in a desolate state. Cities and towns had to be rebuilt, the taxes diminished, the army reorganised. So urgent was all this that he could not afford—as he wanted to—to

lead an expedition into Britain personally. The warrior tribes of the Picts and Scots had invaded the Roman part of the island. Julian despatched General Lupicinus to deal with the invaders. Subjugated Batavians, Frisians and Rhinelanders had to build his invasion fleet.

He himself had set up headquarters in Lutetia Parisiorum—Paris, as people had begun to call it. It was chosen mainly for strategic reasons: the central position of the little town made it invaluable for the man who had to keep a watchful eye on all the provinces and districts.

Perhaps, if the gods allowed him to remain in office, he would build something like a real capital here. . . .

"Stranger here, eh?" asked the red-haired Celt.

"Yes," said the eunuch.

"Like it here?"

"Very much. Paris is a lovely town."

"Tried the wine?"

"Not yet: perhaps you could give me some advice. Which is the best?"

"Number four," grinned the redhead. "Isn't it, Tamborix? Isn't it, Vagorix?"

The soldiers agreed.

"Old Prunio numbers his wines, you know, stranger. Number one is something like vinegar and cat's urine—"

"Hahaha—"

"Number two is only vinegar—"

"Hahaha—"

"Number three is amazingly like wine—in fact one might almost think it *is* wine—and number four is what a man can drink—if he's got money. Got any?"

"Of course," smiled the eunuch and he threw a fistful of silver pieces on the table. "Think we could get some number four for this lot?"

"By Epona, the horse goddess—you bet we can. Hi, Prunio! A whole skinful of number four for the noble stranger here."

"Come and sit with me," said the eunuch. "And good luck and a long life to all of you."

They sat down, three at first, then, on the eunuch's beckoning, another four. There were about fifty or sixty men in Prunio's tavern, all of them soldiers—the room was full, but the stranger saw clearly that the host did not feel particularly happy. It was not difficult to guess why. The stranger had been in the room for about a quarter of an hour and no one had ordered anything. They were just sitting around talking, and making one miserable goblet last. . . .

"No money?" asked the stranger with a twinkle in his eye. A few juicy curses was the answer.

"We've had no pay for generations," growled the redhead. "I don't even remember what money looks like—"

"Try this one to refresh your memory," said the stranger.

"What? A piece of gold? Well, well—didn't think I'd see anything like this these days—thanks, stranger."

The famous number four came—it was neither good nor bad, but it was drinkable.

"To the little Cæsar," said a huge man with a walrus moustache.

"What? When he doesn't give us a penny?"

"Never mind— 'Tisn't his fault, you pie-face. He can't pay us when he doesn't get paid himself, can he? First goblet to the little Cæsar."

"All right—but I still think—"

"Don't think—drink!"

"I still think, he should *get* himself the money—one way or the other."

"He can't. . . ."

"Don't be silly—he gets the money from the taxes, doesn't he?"

"Yes, but it all goes to Milan and Rome and places like that. *He* doesn't keep it."

"He shouldn't send it on, that's what I say."

"He's got to."

"Fool! Can't you see: the Emperor—"

"Boooohh!"

"Shut up. Never know who's around, do you?"

"I'm not afraid."

"Oh no. Not you. You are never afraid *before* there's any danger."

"Seems to me it's too long ago since you heard your own screams—"

"Shut up. The next goblet to the noble donor. May he never lack pieces of gold—and may he stay with us for a long time—"

"Thank you," said the eunuch, "but the last part of your wish is not likely to be fulfilled—"

"Why not? Are you leaving Paris soon?"

"No. Although I can't stay as long as I intended to."

"Well—then—"

"But you'll be leaving soon."

"We? No. Not before next Spring, when the Cæsar goes on a short visit to Britain. And that'll be only for a few *weeks*."

"I'm afraid you are not very well informed, friend—what's your name?"

"Tamborix. And I *am* well informed. We are to stay in Paris for at least another three months, and then they will send some contingents to the Rhine fortresses—"

"Don't talk carelessly," warned the man with the walrus moustache.

The eunuch laughed. "Do I look like a German spy?"

"You never know," said the man sombrely.

"You're quite right." The eunuch laughed. "Perhaps I'd better tell you: I'm a leather manufacturer and I originally intended to settle down here—but now I won't."

"Why not?"

"It isn't safe."

The soldiers roared with laughter. "Not safe! That's a good one! Gaul hasn't been so safe for a hundred years."

"You don't seem to have heard of the little Cæsar, where you come from. . . ."

"He's swept the country clean, let me tell you—"

"And the provincials are paying less taxes here than anywhere else."

"I've heard all that." The eunuch nodded. "That's why I intended to settle down here. I only changed my mind this morning, when I got the news."

"What news?"

"About the army going East."

There was a pause. Then Tamborix laughed shrilly. "Someone's told you a damned lie. Whoever's going East, it's not the little Cæsar's army."

"Not the whole army," admitted the eunuch. "Only the Herculeans, the Batavians, the Petulants and the Celts—"

"What nonsense!"

"—and three hundred men from every Roman legion."

"Are you joking?"

"Certainly not. That's why I said I'm not likely to be in your company very long—you'll be leaving Paris even before I do."

Another pause. "Listen," said Tamborix. "I don't know who's told you this yarn, but you *must* be wrong. It's only three months ago that we renewed our army oath for another three years, *under the special condition that we should stay here in Gaul*—and the little Cæsar himself has solemnly promised it. Whatever happens—we're not leaving."

The stranger was visibly embarrassed. "I'm sorry to give you such bad news—but I *know* it's going to happen. Most of the garrisons of the fortresses in the north are already on their way, here to Paris—the general assembly point. Then the route goes over the alpine passes through Noricum, Il-

lyricum and so on to Byzantium and Minor Asia. You are needed for the Persian war."

"It isn't true."

"It can't be true."

"The little Cæsar would never do that."

"Maybe he's got to do it," jeered Tamborix.

A big soldier in the uniform of the Batavian auxiliaries came up to their table. "Could not help hearing what you said," he growled in a guttural sort of Latin. "You tell me—this really true?"

"I'm afraid so," said the eunuch with polite regret. "Have a goblet of wine, friend?"

The Batavian drank the goblet, wiped his mouth with his naked forearm and spat. "I married man," he said. "They can't send married man East. What's going to happen to wife?"

"He's right," cried Tamborix. "There are thousands of us who've married—are we going to leave our wives and children here without protection? Why, we'll have the Franks and the Alemanni back in Gaul in no time."

"That's why I said the province isn't safe," nodded the eunuch sadly. "Of course the Germans will come back, when you've gone. Have another goblet, friend. It is really most regrettable—the whole thing's most regrettable."

The man with the walrus moustache banged his fist on the table.

"I still don't believe it," he thundered. "Anybody can tell a damned story. Where did you pick that up? Tell us!"

"With pleasure. I heard it in the Palace. I was trying to do some business with the Cæsar's administration, but no one had time for me, because two Imperial envoys had arrived: the Tribune Leonas and the Notary Gaudentius, with full powers to pick the troops for the East."

"And—and the little Cæsar?"

The eunuch shrugged his fleshy shoulders "What can he do? He's only the Cæsar—not the Emperor—that's the trouble."

"He won't allow that to happen—"

"He can't!"

"We're not going."

"I'm not going to leave Morna when the Germans come—"

"To hell with the Emperor—"

"I'm sorry," said the eunuch, obviously upset. "The last thing I wanted was to be the bearer of bad news—. Do have some more wine—here's money. I—I think I'll retire now."

I've had rather a disappointing day myself. Good night, friends."

Outside he stood for a while, listening to the noise of the voices in the tavern. It seemed to increase rather than to quiet down. He nodded and walked on. Under an archway a big Nubian was waiting for him with a cart and two horses.

"To the Palace, Hiempsal."

"Yes, Master."

"Mardonius!" exclaimed Julian. He jumped up and ran towards his friend. "The gods be thanked—you're the first joy I've had for many months—welcome—oh, you do me good—I haven't been so lonesome since you freed me from that monastery—"

"My poor friend—"

"Do come and sit down. Are you hungry? Thirsty? I can't tell you how glad I am that you are here—"

"So you haven't forgotten me entirely," said the eunuch with a slow smile.

"Forgotten you? I? Could one forget the man who saved one's life? But I merit your reproach. I haven't written much to you, lately, have I? You should be glad, Mardonius. I've had nothing but trouble, sorrow, disappointments, ever since—Helena."

"I know," said Mardonius with a sigh. "And I am sorry to say I shall have to add to them myself."

"What's happened? There's hardly anything left that could hurt me."

"A great friend of yours has died, Julian."

"A friend? Libanius? Maximus? Not Maximus, I hope—"

"The Empress, Julian."

Julian bit his lip.

"I was wrong," he said after a pause. "There are still things that hurt. Poor Eusebia. How did it happen?"

"She has been ill for years, as you know. Her heart gave out in the end."

Julian went over to the window. The sky was full of stars. "She was too good for this world," he said.

"Too good for the Court, anyway," nodded the eunuch.

"And she has been Constantius' good angel—and the last tie between you and him. . . ."

"Almost the last," murmured Julian. "There is still my oath. . . ."

"It is only natural that now the Emperor's evil spirit has an easy task," continued Mardonius, without taking any notice of the interjection. "Eusebius came back with colours flying, after your victory at Strasbourg. But as long as the

Empress was alive he could not make any real headway—although there was a rumour of a cloud between her and the Emperor during the last weeks—in fact, ever since the death of your poor wife—no one quite knows why—”

“Perhaps it is better that no one knows why,” said Julian tonelessly.

“As soon as the Empress died, the very air of the Palace seemed to change,” continued Mardonius, “and it became unhealthy—especially for me! I actually fainted twice in one day, and asked for leave to go to my estate in Nicomedia. It was granted, most graciously. But instead of going to Nicomedia, I rushed up to Gaul, and so quick was my journey that I arrived even before the Imperial courier, announcing the official mourning—”

“He still hasn’t arrived.”

“But unfortunately Leonas and Gaudentius have—”

“You know that?”

“What do you take me for! It was Eusebius’ masterpiece and he made it a great secret. But he was just a trifle *too* secretive about it. They left four days before me and I couldn’t catch up with them. Have you received them yet?”

“Three times. I tried hard to make them see how things are. I might just as well have spoken to stones.”

“Naturally. They have fixed orders. Besides, Leonas is an ambitious man and he has reasons to believe that he’s going to become commander of the army in Gaul—after you. And Gaudentius is the First Chamberlain’s right hand—”

“I am deeply honoured.”

The eunuch rose. “Julian, my friend—don’t you understand what all this means?”

“Of course I do, Mardonius.” Julian passed a weary hand over his forehead. “Constantius wants me to fall—”

“He does. As usual he is too much of a coward to dismiss you straightway; besides that would make him appear to be ungrateful. He prefers to lure away the core of your army, knowing very well that you promised them in his name that they would never be forced to leave Gaul. In short, he wants to discredit you in the eyes of your troops.”

“Quite.”

“You have performed miracles. You have saved Gaul for the Empire. You have restored sound administration. The news of your mild taxation, the safety of your roads, the bettering of the lot of the people has spread beyond these provinces. I am told that their population is increasing by leaps and bounds. And your reward? Do you know the Emperor’s reaction to your military success?”

“Yes,” said Julian with a bitter laugh. “I know that by a

coincidence. Pamphlets wrapped in laurel twigs were sent to us by mistake, they were destined for the armies in Illyricum and Pannonia. According to them it was not I who had defeated the Alemanni and the Franks: it was Constantius. *He* made the battle plan of Strasbourg. King Chnodomar surrendered to *him*. My name wasn't even mentioned."

"Well?"

"Shall I remonstrate with the Emperor about it? He knows as well as I that it is a pack of lies."

"Don't forget that it is *he* who will pay the historians to record what happened."

"I can't help that." But now the young Cæsar's face twitched nervously. Mardonius leaned forward, as always when he wanted to ram home a point.

"Julian—don't you see what's going to happen? Either your troops will obey the Emperor's orders—then you'll be left with only a few thousand men, unable to withstand another German offensive: you will be beaten and it will be said that you never really recovered Gaul at all—"

"Yes—I know—"

"Or the troops will—disobey. What are you going to do then?"

"Make them obey."

Mardonius groaned. "They'll kill you."

"Perhaps they will. Perhaps it's the best thing that could happen to me."

"And if they do it will be said that all the stories about your victories and your administration were so much nonsense—you were simply another mediocre commander, killed by his dissatisfied troops—"

"Quite."

Mardonius stamped his foot. "I really can't understand you at all, Julian."

The young Cæsar was looking past him. "I told you before, Mardonius: I cannot break my oath."

The eunuch laughed angrily. "You are going to break it in any case. Haven't you sworn to your troops that they won't have to leave Gaul?"

"I was ordered to do so by the Emperor."

"You see? That's how much *he* values an oath. 'Swear it,' he says to-day; 'Break it,' he says to-morrow."

"It doesn't matter what an oath means to Constantius. What matters is what it means to me."

"And Rome? And the gods?"

Julian's body stiffened. "We've been through all this before, Mardonius—never, never will I do what would be a crime in the eyes of the gods."

"And how do you know it would be?" whispered the eunuch. "I saw Cherubaal, just before I left—and he gave me this message: 'The stars give you bloodless victory over your worst enemy.'"

That was the moment when they heard the noise for the first time.

"Thunder?" asked Julian. "An omen, perhaps . . ."

Mardonius listened. "It's getting louder—not weaker," he said. "It isn't thunder. But it's an omen all the same—"

An aide-de-camp came in, pale and excited. "Mutiny, Cæsar. There are thousands of men, streaming to the Palace—"

"What did I tell you, Julian," said Mardonius. "You must act—before it is too late."

But Julian was listening to the noise from outside, which grew and grew in strength. "Close the gates," he said drily, "and man them with my guards. But no bloodshed, unless they are trying to force the gates. That clear? Go!"

"What are you going to do?" asked Mardonius.

"Show them that mutiny doesn't pay."

The noise was deafening now. Julian went over to the balcony. He came in time to see the huge gates closing—which seemed to redouble the fury of the masses, streaming along towards the Palace, brandishing their torches. They had not seen the solitary little figure on the balcony yet—or if they had, they had not recognised it.

Cæsar—Cæsar—come back from the balcony—"

It was Severus, gasping for breath. "Don't show yourself to the troops now—"

"I'm not worried, friend. If they want to send up an arrow, they're welcome—"

"It isn't that, Cæsar, they won't—oh, but you don't know—they've held a meeting this evening; some of my officers tried to attend, in order to report to me, but they never came back, and—"

"Julian! Julian! Julian! Cæsar!— Here he is—here he is!"

"Julian—speak! Speak! Speak!"

There was something rather touching in their clamour—it wasn't a threat at all; it was the giant voice of a child with ten thousand heads, begging to be heard, to be soothed in its pain and anguish.

He raised an arm, and they fell silent, almost immediately. It was a breathtaking silence. Julian looked down on them. It was far too dark to see their faces, too dark even to distinguish individuals; all he could see was a dark mass, with countless little lights glittering all over it—as though the starry sky were reflected by the surface of the earth.

I must speak to the stars, he thought. There must be or-

der in the firmament beneath, just as there is above. And it is I who must maintain the order, and I alone—but for the gods. . . .

He spoke. He was so sure of them, always. He had spoken to them so often. Just once more he had to make them see—not reason, but necessity. He spoke of their merits—their valour—their untiring efforts.

They listened and applauded politely.

Then he spoke of the grim necessities which sometimes override the best of will—and they became silent. When he first mentioned the name of the Emperor, it was as though a sudden chill were going over them. . . .

"The Emperor has always the right to claim obedience, my friends—let us do out of our free will what otherwise we must do because it is our duty. . . ."

Dead silence. Then a voice, shrill and piping; a woman's voice:

"Don't send our men away!"

And five, ten, fifty, hundreds of voices: "We want to stay in Gaul!" "We want to stay in Gaul!" "You promised us!"

But the little figure on the balcony had disappeared. For about a quarter of an hour they stood and screamed for him—in vain. Then they began to disperse.

"Hiempsal!"

"Yes, Master."

"Have you got hold of the men I mentioned?"

"Yes, Master."

"Do they know what to do?"

"Yes, Master."

"Here is more gold—get more people—you know the types I want. Tell them what I told the others—but they must act swiftly. This is the night of nights. Off with you."

Julian had held council for more than three hours. Severus, Aufidius, Ammianus, Marcellinus, Marcus Capito—Sallust had been recalled to Milan some months before, much to his regret; and Mardonius, too, was absent. Julian had sent for him, but he could not be found. He asked Leonas and Gaudentius to join them, but the two envoys declined with great emphasis. "Tell the Cæsar, ours are direct orders," was Leonas' message to the tribune despatched to him. "It is of no interest to us *how* he makes the Emperor's orders obeyed: only that they *are* obeyed."

It was a gloomy meeting. Reports had come in that the troops had not dispersed: they were holding more meetings in various places, and the excitement among them was run-

ning high. When the name of the Emperor was mentioned, there were catcalls and curses. Unless some solution could be found, and found quickly, there might be full mutiny by to-morrow.

"Let's hope that they'll drink too much," said Julian in a desperate attempt to appear bright and unconcerned. "Then they'll have a hangover to-morrow and won't be up to mischief."

There wasn't even a smile. The situation was very bad. The commanders knew that they might all be killed by to-morrow. This sort of thing had happened before when the legions got out of hand—in fact, it was the rule . . . scape-goats were needed.

Perhaps it might have been possible to avoid the worst, if the mission of Leonas and Gaudentius could have been kept secret just a little longer—one could have dealt with the soldiers, legion by legion. Once some of them were on the march East, it would have been much easier to get the others to follow their example. But somehow things seemed to have leaked out almost as soon as the two envoys had arrived. . . .

At last Oribasius appeared in the council room and pointed out that it was nearly three o'clock in the morning. "I'm sorry," he said, as they all frowned at him, "but I am responsible for Cæsar's health."

Julian grinned. "I'm afraid it doesn't matter much in what state of health I am when they kill me—to-morrow." Nevertheless he was touched.

"Very well, friends—it can't do any of us harm to have a few hours' sleep."

He got up and followed the physician into his private suite.

"It looks bad, Oribasius."

"Worse, Cæsar. I've been in town myself, and I've seen and heard—"

"What are you croaking about, you old owl?"

"About what I heard other owls croak about, Cæsar."

"I don't want to hear it," said Julian hastily. "Don't tell me. I've heard quite enough to-day."

"But, Cæsar—"

"Leave me alone, Oribasius."

"But—"

Julian laid both hands on the shoulders of his friend. "I know," he whispered. "I know it all. But there are things that shouldn't be said aloud. Perhaps I would think differently, if Helena were alive—and if I had a child—but now—now all I want is sleep. Good night, my friend—"

He threw himself on his couch.
Sighing, Oribasius left the room.

Come, sleep. Come, sleep— The brother of death aren't you? Don't forsake me, sleep. All other gods have forsaken me. Can a man commit perjury and yet be the child of the true Sun? No. . . . But can he resist the call to greatness and let himself be defeated by the treacherous measures of his enemies, when he knows he *could* solve the Gordian knot—just as Alexander did: with one good stroke of the sword? Helios, Helios, what shall I do? My commanders—poor souls—they tremble for their lives—and yet they did not dare to say the word, the one word that would save them—Mardonius is right, of course—if one is Mardonius, that is the solution. But I am Julian. . . .

Helena . . . I know what you would say: but if you were alive I would be fighting for you and for my child. . . . I need an excuse, do I? . . . I mustn't do it for my own sake, is that it? . . . If I were honest with myself, I would say: not even for Helena; not even for my child. A broken oath is spiritual death. . . . Why can't the gods help their priest in the hour of his dire need? . . . Why must I be alone to face destiny? . . . Around me are masks, not men . . . and Fear—Ambition—Vanity . . . demons, all three. . . . Plato, what would you do? . . . Plotinus . . . Maximus . . . what would you do? But you are silent, shadows, all of you. . . . The abstract is your field, not the stark issues of life itself. . . . Ædesius . . . the huge face held in Chrysanthios' hands . . . what did you say? 'Right can do wrong—have a care—'. . . . I never quite understood that. . . . Right can do wrong. . . . Did you refer to this moment, old prophet? . . . Oh, my head burns and my hands are like ice. . . . I'm ill. . . . Illness is the coward's solution. Mustn't be ill. . . . I'm not ill. . . . Helena, did you foresee this, strange girl, when you told me about the Grand King, whom they crowned before he was born? . . . Was this the most secret wish of your most secret heart? Could I have a word with you Helena . . . but you have gone to the shadows and with you my child. . . . You spoke of the throne of the world, they tell me. . . . Oribasius is always so reluctant, when I try to make him speak about it. . . . She loved power, I know . . . all Constantians do . . . but what do they do with it, when they've got it? . . . Constantius, shame on you: must one murder even an unborn child to make one's throne secure? . . . You are worse than a Persian. . . . You are worse than the Persians in battle, too. They beat you every time. . . . I wonder: are

Persians more difficult to beat than the Germans? . . . I have been Cæsar . . . can't I be Alexander? . . . Nothing stands between me and that: except my word . . . an oath. . . . How much is that? . . . Chnodomar had a simple way of dealing with that question; keep it to-day—break it to-morrow—but then, he is a barbarian; and I am Julian. . . . If the Emperor chooses to have a barbarian's conception of the holiness of an oath, that is his affair. . . . That ~~is~~ of men under my balcony. . . . How I felt the word they did not speak. . . . How I feared and wished . . . yes, wished : . . . they would say it. And yet I cut Oribasius short, when *he* wanted to say it. Hush, I mustn't think of it. . . . And yet . . . what a man could do, with *real* power. . . . Temples would rise in immortal beauty from Britain to Persia. . . . The flames of sacrifice would never be extinguished. . . . Law and order . . . and out of the ruin the Galilean has brought on us, the true belief would rise, phoenix-like, to the very heights of the Sun. . . . *One* man could do that, if he's strong and wise and pure. . . . Constantius cannot do it, and I . . . I must not. . . . But what did they spare me for, the gods? . . . Why did they help me, as they did? . . . Why did they make me triumph over the poison of my enemies at Court, over Alemanni and Franks, me, the little philosopher, without knowledge of the world, without experience in the field . . . only to sacrifice me now, before I could do anything to their glory? . . . What ~~do~~ they want with me? . . . Why? . . .

When he sat up, he had that strange feeling of not being sure whether he was awake or not. The contours of the room seemed blurred, diffused—was there a mirror at the other end of the room? He could not remember—but there must be—or, who was the man over there, pale and upright and stern—who was he, if not Julian's own picture in a mirror? —Only once before he had seen himself like this—in the sacred caves of Ephesus, and just as then his image seemed to speak to him, so now. There was no sound—and yet he heard every word with the utmost clarity. Then all became dark and the very room seemed to rock as though in an earthquake.

He awoke, perspiring all over. He was alone. The world was silent. He rose—went over to the window. It was still dark outside.

Jupiter, he thought. You, to whom Romans have prayed ever since there was a Rome, give a sign to your son—a sign that I am, what I think I am. . . .

He had scarcely finished his prayer, when a swarm of meteors shot across the sky, to disappear in the east.

A thin glow was visible now—the first pale glow of the new day.

Julian sank on his knees.

They came. The Celts were the first, of course. Behind them the Batavians and Herculeans. And behind them the regular legions, more disciplined than the auxiliaries, even in mutiny. Many detachments were marching under their regular subalterns—only the senior officers were missing. Some of them had remained in their private quarters, but the majority had fled to the Palace, where they were entreating the Cæsar's officers on duty to be heard at once.

The three young tribunes were very much embarrassed. They had strict orders to admit no one: but they could hear the noise of the storm approaching and knew that this was an emergency. And here was the Legate Severus, a man of the highest distinction, of almost forty years of war service, holder of many decorations—white as a sheet, and perspiring profusely, imploring them to announce him and his fellow-officers to the Cæsar; Aufidius, too, and Florentius and a dozen others, most of them men of superior rank. Still, they hesitated.

"Very well, then," said Aufidius grimly. "Do you know what the men are up to? They've had one mass meeting after the other and there are rumours—"

"Nonsense, Aufidius," growled Severus. "why not say it as it is?—there have been rumours about it for days. But now—" He stopped. A tremendous, deafening roar from outside:

"Julianus Imperator!"

"There it is," said Severus in a trembling voice.

The three young tribunes looked at each other—like boys who have just heard the most wonderfully good news but don't quite know whether they are allowed to rejoice openly.

The senior officers were dumbfounded. They alone realised what this meant: a hundred informers would get the word of this to the Imperial Court as quickly as horses could run—and they, *they* were responsible. Most of them had their families in Italy, in Greece, in Minor Asia—and the Emperor's vengeance was quick and relentless. On the other hand: *if* Julian took the purple now and conquered—their careers would come to a quick end if they had shown vacillation, even more if they had resisted.

With few exceptions, they were regular soldiers—and soldiers only. They naturally looked to Julian, the Cæsar, for

guidance. And no one knew what Julian's intentions were. . . .

"Are the gates closed?" asked one of the legates breathlessly.

"Yes—have been ever since midnight. No one was allowed to leave or enter until you arrived."

"Where *is* the Cæsar?"

"In the library."

"Reading poetry, I suppose," muttered Aufidius, who prided himself that he had never read a book in his life, except military manuals.

The tension was insufferable. What would Julian do? If he resisted, they would kill him, and after him or with him every officer refusing their wishes. If he accepted, he would have to face the entire might of the Empire in six months—a year, perhaps. Was he going to share the fate of Magnentius? He had won against odds, so far—but could he do it again?

Old Severus turned round: "Friends," he said, "I don't know what will come out of all this—but I know what I shall do: I shall leave the decision to Cæsar."

At last someone had made a decision—if only the decision to leave the decision to someone else.

They all felt a little easier now.

The gates were closed and they were very firm. But Julian knew they would not last five minutes. There were more than fifteen thousand people outside now, most of them soldiers, accustomed to dealing with moats and barricades, and walls and gates—many of them trained by their officers to overcome obstacles of that sort.

Crash—crash—there was the noise of the battering ram, whose construction he himself had supervised a long while ago in Vienne.

Nothing would stop the fifteen thousand. Their mass had become once more an entity, *one* thing, irresistible in its fumbling way. Like a nightmare they would pierce every defence erected against them. . . .

Crash—crash—and yells of triumph—

Oribasius came in. "The gates are down, Cæsar."

"I know. You'd better get out of here."

The physician shook his head. "I'm responsible for the Cæsar's health," he said drily and Julian gave him a smile: that one smile that is dearer to true man even than that of the woman he loves: the smile of another man, respecting and admiring his courage.

Trampling feet—screams—the roar of a thousand voices—
“Where is he?—Julian— Where are you?”

Before Oribasius could stop him, Julian had opened the door that led to the large reception room.

They were just streaming in, howling, yelling, brandishing their arms. When they saw the little Cæsar, standing at the door alone, unarmed and motionless, they instinctively shrank back: but the many hundreds behind them were pressing on—they found themselves driven deeper and deeper into the room. In a few moments it was full. But they all had become silent.

Julian looked around. “What do you want?” he asked as calmly as he could.

They had marched a long way—they had broken through the gates—they had overrun all obstacles. Now in front of their goal, they hedged. But a voice shrilled, from further back:

“Hail! Hail Emperor Julian!”

Immediately they all found their voices. “Hail, Emperor Julian!” “We’ve come to make you the Emperor!” “Down with Constantius!” “Hail, Emperor Julian!”

Not a drop of blood was left in the little Cæsar’s face. He raised both his arms: “You’re mad,” he said. “You have condemned me to death. You’re mad.”

“What does he say?” “He says, we’re mad.” “He doesn’t accept.” “He must accept.” “He must!”

And they roared again. At last he succeeded in making himself heard.

“Is this the behaviour of Roman soldiers? Is this discipline? Do you all want to end on the scaffold?”

“What does he say?” “Quiet—let him finish.” “He must accept.” “He must accept—or else—”

“I know you’re all angry,” said Julian, “and I fully understand your anger. It is just. You have had promises made to you—and these promises have not been kept. Is it not so?”

“Yes!” “Yes!” “We won’t go!” “We won’t go back to Persia!” “We won’t go to the end of the earth!”

Julian nodded. “Right. You shan’t go to the end of the earth. Very well. I shall do what lies in my power to prevent it. I shall write to the Emperor, entreat him to cancel his order—and I shall offer my resignation to him, unless he fulfils the just desire of his faithful army.”

There was a pause—but only for a moment.

“Don’t believe him!” screamed a voice from somewhere in the multitude. “Write letters! Constantius won’t listen to any letters after this!”

"No!" "We don't want to have anything to do with Constantius!" "You are our man, Cæsar!" "We want you!" "You must be our Emperor!" "You! You!" "Lead us!"

"Lead us or die," screamed a giant Batavian and jumped forward, his naked sword in hand.

Julian did not move an inch. Three, four, six soldiers stopped and disarmed the furious German, but there were others ready to strike.

"Give in, Cæsar," said the breathless voice of Severus. He and a dozen other officers had at last forced admission to the library, and Oribasius had opened the door for them. "You're a dead man unless you give in."

"What does that matter?" said Julian. And at the top of his voice he shouted: "Am I going to be forced to act like this by a bunch of miserable cowards?"

A howl of rage went through the packed mass of men.

"We're not cowards!" "Take that back!" "Kill him!"

Julian's eyes glittered.

"Listen to me—all of you. You have hailed me Emperor. Thereby you have signed my death warrant. The Emperor will never forgive, whatever I may say. Therefore threats cannot frighten me. My life is forfeit anyway. My only chance to live lies in accepting—"

"Yes—yes! Hail Emperor Julian!"

"But do I want to accept?" thundered Julian. "Do I want to be the Emperor of men who wouldn't go with me to the very ends of the earth? No! I'd rather die here—"

A voice screamed: "With you we'll go anywhere! Anywhere!"

"Lead us, Julian—with you is victory! Lead us! Lead us!"

And another voice: "With you are the gods!"

Julian turned his head in that direction. But it was impossible to see who the man was.

At that moment the shrill voice of a woman was heard:

"Achilles—where are you, Achilles? . . ."

Julian staggered back. Severus and Oribasius both jumped to his assistance. But he had already recovered. He raised his head.

Not one of the men in the room would ever forget the strange, the visionary expression on his young face, the dark eyes seemed to glow with an almost unearthly light.

"Yes," he said. "I accept. I will lead you."

There was a moment of breathless silence. Then the storm broke.

"Hail, Emperor Julian!"

"Hail, the Emperor!"

"Julianus Imperator!"

"Julianus Imperator Augustus!"

They broke loose. Men seized him, lifted him on their shoulders.

"A diadem—where's a diadem?"

Already they were carrying him round in triumph.

"Take this here," shouted an enthusiastic Petulant, and brandished a beautiful necklace, set with precious stones: he had looted it in a conquered town. But it was a woman's ornament and Julian shook his head. "What about this one?" beamed a young tribune, and produced the gilded breast-plate of his charger. Again Julian refused. A standard-bearer took off his military collar: "Here, Emperor—it's a man's armour, and nothing to be ashamed of."

They crowned him with the strange diadem. On a broad shield they carried him out of the room and down the stairs, to show him to the multitude outside who still did not know of the decision. The thousands yelled with delight, their cheering seemed endless.

Among the last people to leave the Palace was a simply dressed woman and a squat, fat eunuch, almost entirely covered by a huge cloak.

"Well, are you satisfied?" laughed the woman. "I must say, I didn't think it would have such a strong effect: such a silly thing to say: 'Achilles—where are you, Achilles? . . .'"

"Be quiet, you fool," said the eunuch.

"There's no reason to be rude, is there? I did exactly what you wanted me to do and it must have been important. Did you see how his face changed, when he heard it?—I think it's worth a few more pieces of gold."

"You're right," said the eunuch, and buried a hand in his huge cloak. In the next moment the woman screamed and fell. Half a dozen soldiers stopped on their way to the gates. "What's happened? What have you done to her?"

"The necessary," said the eunuch, calmly securing his dagger. "She was one of Constantius' spies."

"Was she now? Well done. Down with all spies. Long live Julian!" They ran on. From outside came the frenzied acclamation of the masses. The eunuch listened, smiling. "At last," he said.

PART FOUR

A.D. 361-363

CHAPTER XXIX

"Well, friend Sallust," said Oribasius. "How do you like our new order?"

The Tribune grinned. "It's the most incredible thing. Caesar Julian—I'm sorry—Emperor Julian in his capital of Constantinople—if anyone had told me that a year ago, I'd have thought him mad. I'm still not quite sure whether it's true—"

"I can understand that. You've been out there in some godforsaken place—what was it? Pelusium? Circesium?"

"That's right. Circesium, at the present Persian frontier. But we lost it to the enemy, and when I tried to prevent it, a very rude Persian clubbed me over the head. It has stopped me from thinking for some while now—"

"Let me see," said Oribasius. "Bend down a little, can't you? Well—I've seen worse. You've been lucky. Any headaches?"

"A little, when the weather changes. But I suppose it can't be compared with the Emperor's headaches—"

"He hasn't got time to have a headache. I've never seen anybody like that man, and I never shall. Have some wine, won't you?"

"Thanks, I will. Nice pitcher . . ."

"I got that in Sirmium when we took it last spring. And this couch belonged to the late Eusebius."

"What? The First Chamberlain is dead?"

"Didn't you know?" Oribasius helped himself to a goblet of wine too.

"I had no idea. . . . I wish you'd tell me what happened—I know practically nothing: after my wound I was unconscious for weeks and it took me six months before I really got going again—I've only just arrived in Constantinople, and here I was told that Julian had occupied it—"

"You know that Constantius is dead, don't you?"

"Yes. But that's about all. I don't even know how he died or why. Come on—you must treat me as though I were a

boy trying to learn his history lesson. Start at the beginning."

"Very well. By the beginning you mean, I suppose, the moment when Julian took the purple? It was all very dramatic at first, but not at all later on. He got worried about the whole thing and sent a very moderate letter to Constantius—"

"Just as Magnentius did—"

"Well, yes. We were in an awkward position, you see: the whole trouble started with the soldiers refusing to leave Gaul—and they refused mainly because of their fear of the barbarians invading the province again when they had gone East. Constantius gave our envoys a very bad reception, and then sent a bishop, Epictetus, to ask Julian to come—alone, if you please—to the Imperial Court, to justify himself. Julian said he would have gone with pleasure, but unfortunately he had dreamt of his brother Gallus the night before. . . . The bishop swore that his life was safe, but Julian said he had more confidence in the gods than in the word of Constantius, and would have to follow their call to the task which they had appointed to him."

"The bishop didn't like that very much, I suppose."

"He cursed him in no uncertain terms and returned. And his master went so far as to request the barbarian tribes to invade Gaul again."

"A fine thing to do. And did they?"

"Julian didn't give them time. He led a lightning campaign into Germany, captured King Vadomar, the most dangerous of the German chiefs, and crossed the Rhine again. It was all over in an incredibly short time and we took many important hostages. In the meantime we had gone on feverishly with our preparations for the war with Constantius. It's a queer thing, but Julian was quite cheerful about it—he was firmly convinced it would be an easy task—"

"So was Constantius," nodded Sallust, "or in any case he pretended to be quite sure of it. Always spoke of a hunting party—I remember it well, because it was before I got hit on the head. But go on—what happened then?"

"We struck. Julian sent a column into Italy, and himself marched across the Alpine passes into Norcium and Illyricum. We captured Sirmium by a ruse. The whole thing went like magic. Only in Aquileia we had a spot of trouble. Then Julian sent his famous manifesto to the Senate in Rome and another to the citizens of Athens—he's always been in love with Athens, bless him."

"You met him there, if I remember rightly?"

"Quite. Where was I? Oh, yes—in Sirmium. We got

stuck there—our army was incredibly small and some recruiting had to be done. Besides there was a lot of other preparations—”

“I can guess,” smiled Sallust. “Oracle ceremonies, omen searching and all that—”

“Yes, frightful,” said Oribasius.

“Is it?” pondered Sallust. “Even the great Constantine believed in these things, you know—and he was a dutiful Christian.”

“Wasn’t,” snapped the physician. “Only became one—in the end.”

“Look at him,” Sallust raised his brows. “You used to be completely indifferent to religious matters. Since when has that changed?”

“Who told you that it had?” muttered Oribasius. “But this way you’ll never hear the end of the story.”

“I’m sorry—do go on.”

“At last we were more or less ready and started marching again, in the direction of Thrace. Julian had made a marvelous plan—three plans, really. But we had only just left the town of Naissus, when we got the news—phew, I shan’t forget that day ever—a little caravan arrived, a deputation, rather, headed by Theolaiphus and Aligild.”

“The Emperor’s—I mean the late Emperor’s best generals!”

“Yes. They rode up and told us that Constantius had died—just like that—from a fever. Dying, he had appointed Julian as his successor—”

“Rich, that is,” said Sallust. “And—do you believe it? I mean, the part about him appointing Julian as his successor?”

“If it’s true, it’s the first—and last—generous thing Constantius ever did,” said the physician drily. “But you should have seen the effect the news had! Man, have you ever seen thirty-two thousand men falling on their knees and praying to about eleven hundred different gods and goddesses, all in one breath?—Right in the middle our little philosopher, so moved that he couldn’t speak—think of it, man!—Julian couldn’t *speak*!—and with big tears rolling down his cheeks. When he found his breath, all he could say was ‘Bloodless victory—the gods have given me bloodless victory.’ He prayed the whole night in the Temple of Athene Pronoia.”

“He’s a pagan,” said Sallust. “But a *good* pagan. So you came to Constantinople without any fighting at all?”

“Practically, yes. Even before we got here, General Nevitta joined us. ‘At last I’m allowed to serve under an invincible hero,’ he said. Julian, with a twinkle in his eye, asked him how he could know that he was invincible. ‘You must be,’

said Nevitta gravely. 'You've defeated the Germans.' He is a German himself, you know."

"Charming modesty."

"Mind you, he's a good officer. Julian's going to use him properly. Well—we arrived here three months ago and have been here ever since—"

"You've told me many astonishing things," said Sallust. "But this last bit I find difficult to believe."

"Which bit?"

"About you having been here three months."

"Why?"

"Surely in that time you should have been able to get a proper staff to work for you in the Palace. I've been walking about for a quarter of an hour and only met one sentry! When I think of what the Palace was like when I last saw it, simply swarming with servants—"

Oribasius laughed. "You'll get accustomed to it—I hope. Julian was in an absolute frenzy about it. There were over a thousand barbers! There were eleven hundred cooks! There were—never mind. He's thrown out more than five thousand people in one go, and similar purges are going on in all the Imperial palaces—in Athens, in Rome, in Milan, in Alexandria—everywhere. Old Roman economy."

"That'll make him many thousand enemies."

"It doesn't matter. It's quite good even—to some extent. I'd rather see a few thousand official parasites his enemies, than—"

"Well?"

Oribasius sighed. "He's a good pagan all right," he said. "And that means he will be up against the good Christians."

"Not necessarily, surely?"

The physician's face was very grave. "Inevitably, Sallust. I'm worried about it. Very."

"You must have changed," insisted Sallust.

"He has changed," said Oribasius. "I don't quite know what it is—but there's that man Mardonius always hovering about him—"

"Brilliant man, I'm told."

"Another eunuch, friend. I thought it would be the end of eunuch rule."

"Well, apparently it's been the end of Eusebius."

"A terrible end, too," nodded Oribasius. "He and his master-informer, Paulus, were burned alive. Many others had to die, too."

Sallust shrugged his shoulders. "That sort of thing will always happen in a new order."

"A special tribunal was set up, in Chalcedon," continued

Oribasius. "It confiscated so many fortunes that we can now finance the Persian war on an unheard-of scale."

"Good news," said Sallust. "Excellent news. I owe the Persians something for my headache."

"Some of the judgments of the Chalcedon court were not to my liking," murmured the physician. "I suppose one can't have one's eyes everywhere at once—but some of the judges were rather anxious to please by being extremely severe, and the final responsibility rests with Julian, of course. There is more of that sort of thing to come, I'm afraid. . . ."

"I often wondered what it might mean to a man to become suddenly all-powerful," mused Sallust.

"He has a noble nature—" Oribasius finished his wine with a gulp—"one can only hope for the best."

"Where is he now?"

"He's been at the port, for the funeral of Constantius; the ship with the body must have arrived two hours ago."

"Big ceremony?"

"Of course. But he went without his diadem and in mourning clothes—you know how he is. He should be back any minute now—despite the great opportunity to make an even greater speech. In fact, he *must* be back soon."

"Why?"

"Because there's another ceremony in an hour's time."

"With another speech?"

"Of course. But this time there'll be no mourning clothes—at least not for him."

"What is it about?"

Again the physician sighed. News that will stir up the Empire—every province, every town, every village will be affected. News bigger than that of Constantius' death, of victory, or defeat—

"Out with it, man—what news?"

"He will proclaim the end of Christianity as the State religion—and the reintroduction of the Olympic gods."

Sallust jumped to his feet.

"You are right—that is the news of the century; and it may well mean the end of Christianity: in fact it *is* the end of Christianity. They've lost that simplicity that alone made for their success. They have become rich and powerful—and corrupt. They're split into a hundred sects, all waging war against each other. The Son of Man had no place to lay His head—the bishops have palaces of their own, riches, luxuries, and slaves. It's the end, and a well-merited end."

"I disagree," said Oribasius. "Christ never asked us to sleep in the open because He did so sometimes; and Christ has nothing against the enjoyment of the riches of the earth."

on the contrary, they've been given to us by God for that purpose."

"Maybe, but He strongly condemned the rich: said it was impossible for them to enter the kingdom of heaven—"

"Difficult," corrected Oribasius. "Not impossible."

"Why, He said it was easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle—"

"One of the gates of Jerusalem was called the 'eye of a needle,'—it was very narrow, and the animals had to scramble through as best they could."

"You astonish me, Oribasius. Whence all this knowledge?"

"What Christ meant," continued the physician, "was that it was difficult for rich people, who are so often in danger of clinging too much to earthly possessions and getting hardened by them. We mustn't take an exaggerated view of 'this is mine.' But He didn't condemn rich people because they were rich. He condemned no one for belonging to any set or class, nor did He set one class against the other. He died for the emperor and the beggar so that both could enter the true Kingdom—"

"Well, well . . ."

"I've seen so many people," the physician went on quickly, "and I've found good and bad ones among the rich and the poor: the only difference I've found is that it seems to be easier to be happy when one is poor. Queer, isn't it? Maybe it's because the rich are always living in fear of losing their riches, and who can be afraid and happy at the same time? Perhaps that's why Christ called the poor blessed—"

"But surely it can't have been His intention to let the rich exploit the poor—?"

"Certainly not: nor do I hold with exaggerated luxury: I quite agree with Julian chucking out thousands of parasites! but I'm afraid he's thrown out many a good man with them. And then, you see, he reinstated about a hundred and fifty or so—all people who loudly proclaimed that they believed in Jupiter or Mercury or some other Olympian deity—"

"I see," said Sallust. "I'm not sure that I blame him for it."

"It's lip service, as likely as not; if the Emperor worshipped a green eagle, they'd swear they have secretly believed in the green eagle all their lives."

"It's better than the golden calf anyway," declared Sallust. "And I don't quite follow you with your explanations of what the Nazarene wanted us to do or not to do— I think he was really only a Jewish deity, if a deity at all—"

The physician chuckled. "The time may come when people will say exactly the opposite: that He was everything but a

Jew and all the Jews had to do with it was that they crucified Him."

"Well, and do you think that's right?"

"No—it's equally wrong. Christ belongs to all men because all men belong to Him. Read the Sermon on the Mount: where is the poet or philosopher who has found words of equal beauty and equal depth? Can you imagine a time when they are not valid any more? Read it—and ask yourself, what sort of a world would it be, if these words were *not* true?"

Sallust shook his head. "That—from you, Oribasius? From the man who once told me that he believed in what he saw and nothing else. What have you seen, then, that makes you talk almost like a Christian priest?"

Oribasius avoided his eyes. "I met a man in Treves—on a certain occasion, and he—seemed to know what he was talking about. So I—went to see him again—quite a number of times, until he—suddenly departed."

"Really? And who was he?"

The physician hesitated. "I'll tell you where he went, though I didn't know that, then; he went back to where he came from—Alexandria."

"Not Athanasius?" asked Sallust with interest.

"Hush," said the physician, "don't mention that name—it is very unpopular with the Emperor."

"I should think so. Do you know what he's done?"

"He returned to his diocese."

"Without permission!"

"It was Constantius who'd banished him to Treves. Julian cannot very well be upset with a man for disobeying Constantius, can he? Constantius had become an Arian, as you will remember, and Athanasius was the leader of the Consubstantialists, or Catholics as they call themselves, because they are firmly convinced that they will be the universal church in the end."

"But once back in Alexandria—what did he do? He was received in triumph by the community, like a conqueror—"

"He is that."

"He resisted every attempt of the Emperor to seize him—"

"Wouldn't you, if you could? And if that Emperor was Constantius? And he did not resist by force."

"No, he fled. But he remained in his diocese all the same and played hide and seek with the police."

Oribasius chuckled. "Once they almost got him—he had only just time enough to flee to a little boat, and they rowed

him up the Nile. Then the police boat caught up with them, and a centurion shouted over to him: 'Have you seen that man Athanasius?' He just said: 'Yes, I have—he's quite near. Row on, Centurion.' He didn't lie, as you see."

"Wily old fox," grinned Sallust. "Be wise like the serpent, eh?"

"He then hid in a monastery for some time," went on Oribasius. "When Constantius' spies smelt him out, he got away again—into the desert. They had put a price on his head. There was no Judas this time. When he celebrated Pontifical Mass, his cathedral was stormed by the Emperor's soldiers. He remained on his seat, didn't budge—until the last man and woman of the community had safely left. Then they wanted to arrest him—but he had disappeared, vanished into thin air. The people, of course, began to talk of a miracle."

"Of course," said Sallust.

"Miracle or no miracle," said Oribasius, "that man's a hero as well as the greatest priest, and perhaps even the greatest man of his time."

"You've got it badly, haven't you?" asked Sallust. "Well, all I can say is, I always liked a brave man fighting against odds—but one man won't stop the rot and the rot has set in—"

There was a noise from outside and Oribasius went over to the window. "Here he comes," he said.

"The one man who won't be able to stop the rot that has set in—"

"Who?"

"What?—Athanasius?"

"No—the Emperor Julian."

CHAPTER XXX

The council was waiting. It was an impressive assembly—on one side the political heads, on the other the military. The huge throne, set up higher than the ordinary chairs, was empty. The Emperor was still working.

"He's overdoing it," whispered General Nevitta to General Aligild. "They tell me he's changing his scribes every four hours and yet the poor men are simply exhausted—"

"True enough. And they had to learn a way of writing quicker too—abbreviating words and even whole sentences by putting in new signs—"

"Horrible. I'm glad I could learn the old ones."

"That's more than I ever did," laughed Aligild. "Still, I suppose a man must know his own business."

"Yes, but his business is simply everything: in the morning he makes laws—in the afternoon he dispenses them. In between he listens to petitioners, formulates a foreign policy, works on military matters and brings sacrifices to the gods."

"Leaves little time for either pleasure or sleep."

"Pleasure? He's never heard of it. And sleep—well they tell me he's writing even at night—poetry or something."

"Poetry—?" Aligild was profoundly shocked. "You don't think that all this work has done something to his mind, do you?"

"I hope not. Ah, here's that fellow Mardonius; now the Emperor will be here soon."

"We don't seem to be able to manage without eunuchs."

"Careful—that man can hear in his sleep."

"Is he going to be the successor to the late and very little lamented Eusebius?"

"Practically; I suppose so. But he won't hold the First Chamberlain's office. I thought I was going to be the only man who has retained his rank at the Palace, as Head of the Domestics, but since then I have been made Chief of the Army in the East."

"No better man . . ."

"Thanks. I know how you feel. Anyway, the new head of the Domestics is that fellow Jovianus."

"What? The man who arrived here with the corpse of Constantius?"

"That's the man. Strange customs they have, these Romans. Jovianus was sitting on the Imperial coffin all the way: matter of duty."

The German generals had been in Roman service for a very long time—but Nevitta was still a Frank and Aligild a Chamavian at heart.

"Greetings, Theolaiphus," said Mardonius. "The Emperor will be with us any minute now."

He smiled and the old general—another German—bowed silently.

Theolaiphus had been the speaker of the deputation informing Julian of Constantius' death, and he had been with the dying Emperor at Tarsus.

"I trust your health is good," said Mardonius in a low voice. "The air is so much better here than in Tarsus. I know the town well—"

Their eyes met in silent understanding.

"The Emperor," shouted a voice.

But before the assembly could rise, Julian was already among them, greeting people right and left.

"Welcome, Jovianus," he said to a good-looking man in his early forties. "I have great plans for you—ah, Nevitta! You'll bring me the list of the Persian fortifications this afternoon; with the latest amendments. Mardonius—and Theolaiphus: what were you two talking about?"

"About Tarsus, Emperor," said Mardonius calmly. Theolaiphus just stood still, as stiff as a rod.

"Tarsus," repeated Julian, and he raised his eyebrows. "That's where St. Paul was born—that supreme charlatan."

In his usual jerky gait he mounted the steps and sat down on the throne: the older members of the assembly saw with some astonishment that he was unshaved, and that his hair was unkempt. There were ink spots on his fingers and the hem of his cloak was torn.

Constantius had always been impeccable in these matters and used to sit on official occasions with the immobility of a statue.

"Quickly then, my Most Illustrious and Most Noble friends," said Julian. "I've got a great many things to do and we mustn't be held up by too many questions. You all know the fundamental principle of my government: to serve the gods and the greatness of the Empire. All other issues must be subordinated to this fundamental principle. I can now inform you that we have made a great deal of progress ever since I proclaimed the abolition of the Galilean creed—a creed not only dangerous but practically pernicious to the safety of the State. I realise very well that even in this august assembly there are still some, at least, who insist on regarding the Galilean carpenter as a god—I look on them with pity rather than with anger. Tolerance is written in golden letters in my mind; after all, there are some of my peoples in the outer West, who believe, I'm told, in a deity in the form of a horse, and others in the South are praying to a holy crocodile; I have no intention of interfering with their beliefs either. Whether it is a crocodile, a horse, or a crucified carpenter's son—may every man choose what seems the highest form of life to him and regard it as a deity. But if I am tolerant, I want others to be likewise, and here is where I must most strongly object to the Galilean doctrine, which regards their 'Three-gods-in-one' as the *only* existing deity, and cannot or will not tolerate others. Surely that is going a little too far. With so much intolerance one should think, of course, that the Galileans really know all about their own God: that at least that One, beside whom there must be no one else, is a crystal clear figure: but no! A hundred sec's are

bickering about the nature, the wishes and even the actions of this strange and fanatical deity; they persecute each other with the most merciless cruelty, and often enough it leads, not only to bloodshed, but to actual battles in the streets of many of my cities and towns. Now I am regarded as a pagan by these people: and if the possession and use of common sense is pagan, then, by Helios!—I am a pagan and proud of it. To me one is one and not three. Three is three and not one. And I cannot think much of a religion of love, whose adherents engage in street battles with each other, in order to clear up theological points—”

“Excellent,” said Mardonius aloud, and many of the hearers took it for a sign to applaud.

“But then, what can one expect?” continued the Imperial orator. “What can one expect of people whose philosophy consists of a hatred and contempt of life and a morbid craving for death? Seven years ago, as a young student in Athens, I pointed out that the Emperors three centuries ago did a great favour to the Galilean cause by allowing so many of its followers to die the death of martyrs: why, it was just what they wanted! Well, then, my friends: *I* am not going to repeat that mistake. If the Galileans are still keen on martyrdom, they will have to look for it elsewhere.”

This time the applause was much stronger.

“There is another religious creed of similar intolerance,” pursued Julian. “And it is closely related to the first: in fact, the Galilean creed is only an offshoot of it: I am referring, of course, to the Hebrews. They too will not acknowledge the existence of any other godhead but their own. My friends, when one wishes to be tolerant, as I do, one must be intolerant against intolerance.”

“Splendidly said.” “Marvellous,” exclaimed several voices.

“Therefore I have made up my mind to reconstruct the Jewish State in order to give the Hebrews a permanent home. They will return to the land of their fathers, which they had to leave after the fall of Jerusalem. There they can be as intolerant as they like—among themselves. But this is only possible by giving them back the very centre of their religious activities: the famous temple of their God, now in ruins, must be rebuilt.”

The Emperor smiled subtly. “I’m afraid, in having it rebuilt, I am getting a little into conflict with the prophecy of the crucified carpenter’s son, who said that the temple was going to be utterly destroyed for good. So, when it is rebuilt, the whole world will recognise him as a prophet of lies. And, by the rays of the true Sun, *I will* rebuild it—now!”

The assembly sat motionless.

"As for the Galileans themselves, I cannot offer them a separate country: they never possessed one; in fact, a close study of their doctrine has taught me that they are supposed to despise possessions altogether, and also that the study of philosophy and the beauty of the arts is anathema to them. As ruler of the Empire it is my duty to look after the welfare of *all* my subjects, including, of course, the Galileans. Therefore I have decided to come to their spiritual aid: in the future no Galilean will be allowed to visit high schools, lecture halls and academies. Let them content themselves with that *faith* which to them makes the advantages of science unnecessary and even suspect. It is quite unnecessary to study Plato and Aristotle if all one needs to gain eternal life is the perpetual reading of the gospels. In denying them what could only be a danger to their faith, I am rendering them a service. They are not going to be grateful to me—I know that. Nor do I crave for their gratitude. I shall let these stupid and deluded people stick to their wretched ideas—but I shall see to it that they do not mingle with the enlightened studies of modern times.

"All this, my friends, was necessary as a measure of defence. But now to more constructive and creative work: the temples of the gods are reopening everywhere. And everywhere it is found that they have been robbed and that beautiful statues have been damaged or destroyed at the hands of the Galileans—"

"Now," murmured Mardonius to Theolaiphus, "this is the part that interests me."

"But even greater crimes than these have been committed," continued Julian. "It is not enough to steal the riches of the temples and to desecrate them—the servants of the religion of love stole the very ground the temples were built upon and erected on them their churches. That I shall not tolerate any longer."

"Retribution," exclaimed Mardonius fiercely.

"Justice," said the Emperor. He seemed quite calm, but his fingers twitched nervously and he had difficulty in keeping his voice steady and controlled. "Three months ago I gave orders to all Provincial governments," he said, "that courts of enquiry must be opened immediately. All sacred ground has to be given back to its rightful owners. The Galilean communities will have to give back what does not belong to them. In demanding this I show myself as their true friend; their admirable law has promised the kingdom of heaven to the poor; and they will advance with more diligence in the paths of virtue and salvation when they are relieved with

my assistance from the load of temporal possessions. . . .”

Obedient laughter greeted this sally.

“But may no one think that such necessary laws are made for the purpose of revenge—” Julian spoke in a more serious tone now. “Two great reasons are binding me to this course: first, I believe in the gods, to whose service I have consecrated my life: I have obtained many titles—some of them by the simple fact of birth; I count those little—some on the battlefield; I count those more—but the title and rank most dear to me is that of the Supreme Pontiff—the first servant of the gods on earth. And my second reason is this: the Galilean creed is a religion for spineless slaves: life means nothing, death means all to them. It is the religion of decay; it was invented by a simpleton; but it will be used by tyrants to keep their peoples in abject submission. If all their hopes are directed towards life after death, nothing much matters that happens to them on earth: with people like that one cannot hold, let alone win the Empire of the world. I shall not persecute them. But, just as I have abolished the *labarum*, the wretched flag of the Cross, and replaced it with our ancient and victorious eagles, so I shall direct the *minds* of my people to loftier and more courageous ideas, so that they may forget the lulling, whining servant’s creed with which they have been poisoned. . . .”

They applauded. There was no necessity for any voting. The senators and councillors of the Imperial Court had long become accustomed to accept the Imperial word as law. Besides, most of the new measures were already in practice everywhere.

“Now to matters of our own faith,” said Julian. “Much work has to be done. The priesthood of our deities must be re-instated everywhere. The long interval has had bad effects, I hear, on many of them. A priest must be pure and learned, humble, but dignified. He should not be seen in taverns or theatres. I have written an essay about priesthood which I shall publish next week; at the same time with my book against the Galilean creed. As Supreme Pontiff I bestow the task of raising and training the entire priesthood of the Empire on a man in whose wisdom and understanding I have implicit confidence—he will be officially, now, what he has secretly been for many years past: the Chief Priest of Jupiter: Mardonius.”

The eunuch bowed calmly, but his eyes were live coals.

“The next question is that of taxation,” resumed the tireless Emperor. “I have checked the reports of—yes, what is it?”

A richly clad Velarius had approached the throne.

"The most gracious Emperor has given orders to report immediately when the philosopher Maximus arrived from Ephesus."

"Yes, yes—and?"

"He's just arrived at the Palace, Sire."

Julian jumped up. "That's all for to-day, my friends. We shall meet again to-morrow at the same hour." And he rushed out, with his wide, ungraceful steps, dragging his cloak after him. "Maximus," he exclaimed. "Where are you?—Maximus!"

Mardonius followed him slowly. The assembly dispersed into small, whispering groups.

The eunuch saw Emperor and philosopher embracing each other on the Palace steps, with the sentries and the people on the wide square staring at them in amused surprise. It took them the better part of a quarter of an hour until they had exchanged congratulations and blessings, and, arm in arm, had come up the steps, where Mardonius was awaiting them.

"At last I'm able to introduce the two greatest friends I have," cried Julian. "Maximus—this is the teacher of my youth; the man to whom I owe my liberation from the Galilean servitude: now the Chief Priest of Jupiter, Mardonius."

"We know each other, Sire," smiled the eunuch.

"And we have been in constant correspondence," smiled Maximus.

Astonished, Julian looked from one to the other. "You—Oh, I understand. Of course you know each other—though, I presume, by another name—by the name given to each of you in—"

"In certain caves," nodded the eunuch. "Maximus and I have been working for a very long time to bring about just what has now happened."

"But neither of us could have succeeded without the genius of the Emperor," said the mystic. "You have fulfilled our highest hopes, Sire."

"I was blind," said Julian, "I should have known better—I should have *felt* that my way to power was helped by—invisible hands."

"By invisible minds, anyway," said Maximus. "I apologise for not bringing Chrysanthios with me; he asked the oracle for both of us and the answer was unfortunate—"

"Unfortunate?" Julian was horrified. "And you yourself—you dared to come in such circumstances?"

The mystic shrugged his shoulders. "I simply repeated my

question—until finally the gods favoured it. Perseverance is a virtue. And as you see I have safely arrived and my journey was most pleasant. Everyone was eager to show respect to a friend of the gods and the Emperor. . . .”

The three initiates had an hour's council all by themselves—then the Emperor had to resume work.

“I'm exceedingly glad about most of what he's done in this incredibly short time,” said Maximus, when he had left. “But I do not entirely agree with him about the way in which he is tackling what he calls the Galilean question. It is a clever word, ‘Galilean’—it takes away the spell of the word ‘Christian,’ and there is much power in a word like that, as you are well aware.”

“I'm so well aware of it that I coined the name of Galilean myself,” grinned Mardonius.

“You did? I should have known. It reduces these people to a provincial sort of unimportance, and it underlines the foreignness of their creed. Very good.”

“I hope it will be reiterated throughout the Empire, Maximus. It is not so much the word itself, but its constant reiteration that does it. Spread a lie—and people may or may not believe you. But repeat it a hundred times for a hundred days—and it will be believed in the end. And since it is believed, it will become ‘part of general knowledge,’ and from then on every lie is quite safe. The human mind works that way. . . . I've spread the name of Julian ceaselessly in these last seven years. People would use it as a parole, as a password—”

“You've done great work, brother. Let us hope that it will last, despite—”

“Despite what?”

“Despite the danger arising from the—Galilean.”

“Let it arise.”

“Friend, let *us* at least be clear-headed about it; theirs is a new idea—”

“It's three hundred and sixty years old, and three hundred and sixty years too old.”

“It is the first time that the idea of expansion through love has been born . . . love, instead of force. It is not a negative idea, whatever the Emperor may say about it to others—and even to himself. You cannot defeat it by force, you know: on the contrary. Force applied against it will only make it stronger.”

“Yes, if it's genuine love,” said Mardonius. “But is it? Look at the *man*—”

“No need to tell me that,” smiled the mystic. “But I have seen strange things on my journey—things that made me .

doubtful. And there is that man Athanasius in Alexandria."

"I know," said the eunuch thoughtfully. "But Julian can defeat him, I think. I was wrong about Julian, you know—I thought he was going to be useful as a figurehead, but he is much more than that, much more. He's grown to such a size that I sometimes fear, he—"

"Wait," interrupted Maximus, "someone is coming—no, he cannot hear us yet, but he's approaching fast—and he brings news—ah, here he is—"

A slave entered. "A man of the name of Cherubaal to see you, Master."

"Cherubaal," exclaimed the eunuch. "I thought he was dead—he had disappeared entirely at the time of Julian's revo—hum—bid for emperorship. Show him in—"

"Here he is," said an old voice and the little Chaldean entered.

"My dear friend," said Mardonius, "what on earth has happened to you?"

The astrologer smiled wanly. "I look different, don't I?"

He did. The wizened face now looked like a mummy's and his movements had lost all their energy—they were the movements of a very old man.

"May I sit down?" he asked. "I—I'm afraid—I won't last very long now—"

"Have some wine," said Mardonius, helping him to sit down.

But Cherubaal shook his head. "No, no—don't give me anything. You might regret it—a little later."

"You know Maximus, of course," said the eunuch; he did not seem to pay any attention to the astrologer's strange remark.

"Yes,—yes—I do, Mardonius—I've come here because I must speak to—to the Emperor. It is—most important."

"The Emperor's working," said the eunuch. "He can't be disturbed just now. But tell me—what happened to you? Frankly I feared . . ."

"That I was dead? You were very nearly right, too. You know I'd told the Emperor—the former Emperor, Constantius—that Julian wouldn't live long—"

"Yes, I remember that."

"He questioned me about that time and again—wanted to know exactly how long Julian was going to live. But I never spoke about the actual date of death—"

"Of course not," said Maximus.

Cherubaal gave him a grateful smile. "All I would say to Constantius was 'Cæsar Julian will not live, as long as you, Sire.'"

"You did say that?"

"Yes. It was true, too."

"How so? Constantius is dead, and Julian is alive."

The little Chaldean chuckled. "By the eyes of—never mind, you've been deceived by the same little ruse as Constantius. He died at the age of forty-seven, didn't he? And Julian is only thirty-one now and he'll never live to be forty-seven."

"So that's what you meant," grinned the eunuch: "and Constantius thought you meant that he would outlive Julian."

"Of course. I explained that to him in a letter I left on my desk, the day when I—vanished. Which was, of course, the day when the first rumours came about the rise of the legions in Gaul. . . ."

"Surely you didn't need those rumours to know what was going to happen in Gaul," said Maximus.

"Yes and no," said the old astrologer. "I knew there was the danger of a revolution: but it depended upon Cæsar Julian's decision. His free will. He could have chosen instantaneous death instead of revolution. Now with most characters one can more or less foresee what they are going to choose in the case of such a dilemma, but with Julian it was doubtful. In any case I preferred to disappear. . . ."

"Where to?"

Again the little Chaldean chuckled. "You know how fond I always was of—"

"Flamingo tongues," laughed Mardonius.

"—and sphinxes," completed Cherubaal. "Well, I thought: if I'm going to live in exile for a while, let it be somewhere nearer to what I'm fond of."

"What you really mean is that you wanted to go back to the cradle of astrology," said Maximus gently.

"You are a very good man. Maximus"—Cherubaal fixed his eyes on the placid face of the mystic. "That is—you could be a very good man, if you had humility as well as knowledge. But never mind that now. You're right. I have wanted to go back to Egypt all my life, and now I have. I stayed in Alexandria."

The two initiates exchanged a quick glance.

"Interesting," said Mardonius with well-played indifference. "There's been some unrest in that city, lately, I'm told. . . ."

"And there will be more," nodded Cherubaal. "And not only in Alexandria—not only in Egypt—I do wish you'd try and let me meet the Emperor—"

"I'm afraid that depends a little upon what you wish to

say to him," said the eunuch and an ominous silence followed.

Then Cherubaal nodded gravely. "I was afraid of that," he said. "But it wouldn't have been right to ask anybody but you to secure me an audience. You are the Chief Priest of Jupiter—and unless Maximus holds a still higher rank in the brotherhood of Hermes—"

"It is I who am your superior," said Mardonius quickly. "Besides, it is part of my duty to see to it that the Emperor is not troubled with disagreeable predictions—whether they should concern the span of his own life, or the danger of unrest in Alexandria."

Before Cherubaal could answer, the slave reappeared.

"The august Emperor!" he announced and bowed deeply towards the door.

One of the first measures of Julian had been the abolition of the proscynema, the humiliating prostration upon which Constantius had insisted.

Julian came in, alone: "I've escaped them," he said cheerfully. "They'll have to use their own wits for a while, my learned councillors. Now—who is this? By Cybele, it's Cherubaal. Welcome, friend. I haven't forgotten your last prophecy of bloodless victory which the gods so splendidly fulfilled. Speak, man, what is it that I can do for the sage of the stars? An academy? Disciples? Anything you may need is yours."

"You are most gracious, Sire," said the little Chaldean in a trembling voice, and Julian saw how much the man had aged. "But I have not come to ask for favours—at least, not for myself."

"Sit down," urged Julian, "you look tired, friend."

"I've had a long journey, Sire, and a perilous one, but now it has come to an end."

"And are you here entirely on your own?" asked the suave voice of Mardonius.

"I've come from Alexandria, Sire," went on Cherubaal. Perhaps he had not heard the Chief Priest's question—he was obviously in a state of great excitement. "Sire—all is not as it should be there—and I've come to tell you about it before more harm is done—more than even you could repair, Sire."

"What do you mean?" asked Julian, frowning.

"I mean, Sire, that some of your officials have misunderstood your orders—I have no other explanation. May I speak frankly?"

Mardonius rose. "I'm afraid our old friend is ill," he said glibly. "It would be much better if he could have a few days' rest, before—"

"No, no, no," interrupted Cherubaa! vehemently. "I know I'm ill—so ill that I haven't got the days left which you wish me to waste on rest. I must speak now, if I am to speak at all—"

"Speak, then," said Julian quietly.

Cherubaa! sighed with relief. "Thank you, Sire— I knew you would hear me. It's persecution that has broken out: terrible persecution. A temple of Selene had been laid waste by the Sabellians near Arethusa—"

"Has it?" asked Julian in burning anger. "And the authorities did nothing about it? Just wait—I'll show them. Thank you, Cherubaa!, for telling me—"

"Forgive me, Sire," pleaded the trembling voice, "but I had not finished—the incident happened twenty-two years ago. . . ."

"Oh," said Julian, somewhat disappointed.

"And now, when your instructions came that the Christians must pay for all damage done by them to temples, the governor of the province claimed the full value of the temple from the Christians—"

"And so he should!"

"But, Sire, there are no more Sabellians living in the province, now. The only remaining Christians are all poor and quite incapable of paying anything like what was required of them. Besides, none of them had anything to do with the destruction. Nevertheless they were ordered to pay and when they couldn't, the newly appointed priests of Selene led a crowd of people to their houses and burnt them to the ground. Their old bishop, Mark, who tried to oppose them, was cruelly scourged and his beard torn out: they stripped him, smeared him with honey and hung him in a net from a tree, exposed to the sun and poisonous insects—"

"Is he dead?" asked Julian tonelessly.

"No, Sire—he survived by a miracle: and when they finally released him, he thanked his oppressors for making him suffer for the glory of Christ."

"Of course," said Maximus. "*That* is the danger."

But Julian shook his head. "I shall give orders to spare his life," he said coldly.

"But, Sire, Sire—that is only one incident out of a thousand. Sixty-seven people were burnt to death in their own houses in Arethusa alone. And in Alexandria—" Cherubaa! wrung his gnarled old hands—"in Alexandria, Sire, I've seen women clubbed to death for refusing to give up their Christian faith— I've seen Christian cemeteries torn down, the graves dug up and the remains of the people thrown into the

sewers—because the cemetery was built upon grounds where a Serapis temple had been over sixty years ago. . . .”

“It’s bad enough that consecrated ground should have been used as a home for decaying Galileans,” said Mardonius sharply. “What’s come over you, Cherubaal? Whence this sudden sympathy for the religion of the tombs?”

The old man suddenly slumped in his chair and Julian called out:

“Slave! Fetch Oribasius.”

“He is very ill,” said Maximus.

“Quite,” assented Mardonius, “one shouldn’t take too seriously what he says—”

“I am not delirious,” murmured the little Chaldean. “Only—weak—I entreat you—Sire—listen to me—”

Maximus gave him a sip of wine, but he could swallow only a few drops. Then Oribasius came, pale and anxious, thinking that Julian had suddenly fallen ill. He gave the little Chaldean a brief examination. “What you need is rest, old man,” he said gently.

His patient smiled. “Yes—yes—a very long one—and—soon enough I shall—have it. But not now! Sire—a Christian bishop has been foully murdered in the streets of Alexandria—”

“Who? Athanasius?” asked Mardonius eagerly.

Oribasius recoiled as though he had been hit, but the others were looking at Cherubaal.

“No—no—it was Bishop—George—and before long he will be Saint George—but they slaughtered Christians—by the hundreds—let me get up—”

Oribasius helped him, against his better judgment. He felt the old man *had* to stand, to say, what he had to say.

“Sire—you cannot want this—not you!—Sire—restore—the peace—”

“Have you become a Galilean, then, you—an initiate?” asked Mardonius in withering contempt.

Cherubaal raised a trembling finger. “Let—the Emperor—ask me that—”

“Have you?” asked Julian in disgust.

“Yes, Sire,” said Cherubaal, almost cheerfully. “I have ”

“You miserable renegade,” shouted Mardonius. He was beside himself. “What made you do that?”

“Athanasius,” whispered Cherubaal and there was a strange radiance in his wizened face.

Julian folded his arms. “That name is beginning to exasperate me,” he said harshly.

“He was exiled and returned without permission,” mentioned Mardonius with a shrug.

"And your stars?" enquired the Empéror disdainfully, "I suppose you have renounced them, too—one can hardly believe in Mars and Venus *and* in the Galilean—"

The old astrologer smiled. "The stars—" he said, and his voice sounded much stronger and clearer than before, "they are sending energy and light and they influence us and all things on earth—no, I have not—renounced the stars—but I acknowledge Him, who—alone *made* the stars and gave them—their powers—Him, the only true source of all—does not—the Credo—start with the very words—'I believe—in one God, the Father almighty—Maker—of heaven—and earth—and of all things—visible and—invisible—'"

As he fell, Oribasius opened his arms, caught him and laid the emaciated little body on the nearest couch.

"He is dead, Sire," he said in an unsteady voice.

"And he was mad before he died," added Mardonius.

"I don't think so." Maximus caressed his well-kept beard. "He was quite lucid—and he showed us where the danger lies—"

"You mean—Athanasius?" asked the eunuch.

"No, friend—I am looking ahead in time. The Emperor and you and I—we regarded the Galilean creed as just a phase in the life of humanity; a phase that will pass, and perhaps already is on the downgrade now. We believed that because that creed seemed to deny all the wisdom mankind had stored up in many millennia: all the knowledge of *Nature*, of which the study of the stars in their courses and of the influence of the stars is part. They seemed to deny knowledge and science and to focus all our faith alone—"

"What else can you expect from these wretches?"

"But there has been too little faith in the world," continued the mystic. "And that is, perhaps, why the gods allowed this outburst of it in its strange guise: the deification of a carpenter's son. It is a great thing, if people can die for their faith. Look at this old man—he spent his life advising people on the basis of his knowledge: but surely he often told people just what they wanted to hear, or he concealed from them what he could have told them—from fear that it might endanger him, his life, or his earthly goods. And now, when he had become a Galilean, he spoke out, right in the face of the Emperor—and in front of you, whom he always feared—and he spoke the truth."

"Maximus!"

"Yes, yes, my friend, the truth—to the best of his understanding—and he was not mad at all. But this is the most dangerous sign: he has *not* renounced his stars: he—and perhaps even his *new* teacher, Athanasius—sees no contradic-

tion between faith and knowledge; and he is right. There isn't. For, if knowledge is true, it will be a supplement to faith. I didn't think a Galilean could conceive that. Here, friend is the danger: if the Galilean creed can afford to regard knowledge as supplementary, instead of opposed to faith—as not in contradiction to its teachings—then it will survive for a very long time, and perhaps for ever—which means for the whole course of mankind's life on earth—”

Mardonius snorted. “Have you taken over Cherubal's gift of prophecy?”

But Julian beckoned him to silence. “One thing is clear,” he said. “We must stamp out this danger. In every other report I read the hateful name of that man who has taken away soul after soul from the keeping of the immortal gods. Athanasius must not be allowed to remain in power—he must leave his bishopric, and he must do so at once.”

“You have no legal right to punish him,” warned Maximus. “Your own clemency allowed all exiles to return.”

“But I did not allow Athanasius to usurp the archiepiscopal throne of Alexandria,” burst out Julian. “He should have awaited the orders of his sovereign. Athanasius will leave Egypt. I shall give the order at once and I shall sign it myself.” He rushed out.

“War,” said Maximus, “and a far more dangerous war than that against Germans and Persians combined.”

“A war,” said Oribasius, to the other's surprise, “in which the dead alone are victorious: here lies Athanasius' first victory.”

The mystic looked at the physician. You too, then, he thought. Then to Mardonius: “You are going, friend?”

“Yes. And I wonder—”

“What about?”

“Banishment from Egypt is nothing. That man has been exiled before. But I wonder whether he is really—immortal. We shall see.”

CHAPTER XXXI

“What a town,” exclaimed Sallust. He took off his helmet, threw it on a table on which a dozen surgical instruments jingled in protest and flounced himself into a chair. “This is the most sickening rat-hole I ever saw in my life.”

“Easy now,” said Oribasius; he was washing the eyes of a six-year-old Syrian girl with a lotion.

Her mother was standing by, anxiously;—perhaps because

she was not quite sure whether the foreign physician was healing her child or poisoning her.

"That'll do, my child—come back in three days. No, it's all right, mother, keep your coins. But see to it that the bandage stays on, d'ye hear? and teach your children to ward off the flies. That's all. . . ."

When they had gone: "Any more bad experiences, Sallust? I don't like Antioch much myself. Too many flies. Every third or fourth person's got inflamed eyes. I had eighteen cases this morning and over twenty in the early afternoon."

Sallust spat a few round, juicy curses. "Why the Emperor should choose Antioch as his headquarters is beyond me. Of all the foul, ungrateful, pleasure-crazy idlers, these people are the worst."

"They are half starved, Sallust—"

"Whose fault is that? The harvest's been bad—certainly. But the Emperor had four hundred and twenty thousand measures of corn sent here, from Hierapolis, from Chalcis, even from faraway Egypt. And he fixed the price at such a low level that everybody should have been able to buy his fill. What happens? The rich buy it all up and keep it back, selling it in small measures: at incredible prices, of course."

"I know, I know. But didn't the Emperor have them all arrested?"

"Yes—two hundred nice, fat, rich Antiochians were arrested—and two hundred nice, fat, rich Antiochians got themselves the best lawyers in town and proved, with witnesses in abundance, that they had nothing to do with it. Their books, of course, were in perfect order. Straw men, obviously. And the masses cheerfully make the Emperor responsible for everything. Pious Galileans, most of them, too. Damned hypocrites. The warehouses are full enough."

Oribasius nodded. "That sort of thing's become worse, too, lately, but I suppose it always happens when there are plenty of soldiers in a town. Still, I'm sure there are decent people too, Galilean or otherwise."

"One in ten, maybe," growled Sallust.

"Well, Sodom and Gomorrah would have been spared, if a handful of decent people had been left there—"

"You've been reading the Bible again. Have you ever told the Emperor that you have—mhm—joined the creed he dislikes so much?"

"No."

Sallust's tone was just a trifle sharper than usual, as he asked: "Don't you think you should tell him?"

Oribasius looked up: "If I thought so, I *would* have told him, but I'm afraid, if I did, he would part with me—and I

don't want him to do that. I was with his wife, when she did, you know—and I decided then that, never mind what happened. I was going to stick to him—sort of made a vow, if you see what I mean. He's such a genius and such a fool—I'm—hum—very fond of him, despite—well. Anyway, he needs someone to tell him that it's time to go to bed. Sometimes he even listens to me—”

Sallust was moved. “You're a good fellow, Oribasius. Sorry, if I—I'm a bit rough sometimes—”

“That's all right,” said the physician absent-mindedly. “I only wish he'd spare himself a little more—always keyed up, he is. What with that damned campaign he's preparing, and the administration, and the Antiochians trying to be as difficult as possible, and on top of it he will insist on writing things—have you read his *The Cæsars*? It's a neat piece of work, really witty and rather beautiful in parts. Now he's at a new one—the maddest thing you ever heard: the *Misopogon*, he's called it.”

“*Misopogon*?—the *Beard-Hater*? What's that mean?”

“He'll tell you himself.” Oribasius chuckled. “I can hear him. I'd know that step from any other in the world.”

Julian entered. He was dressed in the full ceremonial robes of the Supreme Pontiff, and his face was radiant with joy.

“A double pleasure, my Oribasius—how are you, Sallust?—the *Misopogon* is finished—and I shall, at last, open the groves of Daphne. This is to me a greater day than any victory over the Persians.”

“You certainly look like a conqueror, Sire,” smiled the physician. “I was just going to tell Sallust here about your new book—”

“Yes.” The Emperor laughed. “I don't think anything quite like it has ever been written before—it's something new. Some of my Antiochian friends thought fit to publish a satire on my beard: it's not without wit either, and I thought one should give them an adequate answer—other Emperors would have been content with confiscating not only the pamphlet, but also the possessions of the writers. I prefer to beat them with their own weapons. I'm dying to hear what you think of it, but unfortunately we have no time left now: they're awaiting us in Daphne. Come, Sallust.”

On the way to the chariot, the Tribune asked: “It's probably very ignorant of me, Sire, but what is it about these groves that makes them so important to you?”

“Sallust! Shame on you—the most holy of all sanctuaries of Apollo—surrounded by the loveliest laurel groves in the world. There spouts the famous Castalian fountain, whose oracle is second only to that of Delphi. You dip a leaf into

the stream, and words will appear on it, foretelling your fate. And the statue of the god is by Praxiteles—it was all spoilt and mutilated by the Galileans, of course. They had a church built in the middle of it all, dedicated to one of their martyrs, St. Babylas, a former Bishop of Antioch. He died in prison, I believe under Emperor Severus; and as usual, they desecrated the holy ground with their foul sepulchres. I had all that undone; the ground is consecrated afresh, and now everything is ready, they tell me—”

They mounted the chariot. “No troops, Sire?” inquired Sallust, not without anxiety.

“Troops? For this ceremony? No—I’m not the Emperor to-day. I’m the humblest priest of Apollo. Drive on, friend.”

This drive, little over a quarter of an hour, became the happiest time of Julian’s life. He had performed the office of the Supreme Pontiff before, in Byzantium, when he sacrificed to Helios and Jupiter and Athene Pronoia, as thanksgiving for his bloodless victory over Constantius. But now and here it would be different. This was the first big temple he himself had raised from its ruins and it stood on grounds sacred to the whole Empire. Here indeed was a victory over the Galilean and all he stood for. Ancient beauty had been rescued and restored to pious believers. Here was the first tangible result of his tremendous struggle. Seven years ago he had thought that self-perfection was the only goal worth striving for. Now he knew that it really was up to him to restore the gods to the world, truly a greater feat even than that of Prometheus who had given fire to mankind, and infinitely greater than all that Alexander and Cæsar had achieved; they had conquered with military force only—neither of them had a spiritual mission.

Was it not significant that he, Julian, had conquered Gaul, as Cæsar had done, and was now going to conquer Persia, like Alexander; and that, combining the action of both these immortals, he still had the strength to bring the gods back to a world drenched in the gloom of an absurd Jewish creed?

Daphne—

He had sent messengers to all parts of Antioch, proclaiming the re-opening of the groves, and asking the people to participate in the ceremony. “Bring your offering to the gods, each one of you according to his resources, let us sacrifice hecatombs of oxen and goats and fowl to the titular deity of the town, to Him with the silver bow, the divine spirit instilling into us what is most precious to man: beauty and art.”

There would be rows of youths and virgins, clad in immaculate white, the symbol of their innocence. The aged priest of the temple, overjoyed to be recalled to his sacred

duties, would await him and together they would perform the sacrifice to the god, symbolised by Praxiteles' masterpiece. He had seen it a week ago, when the statue was carried back into the temple; the god was of the whitest of white marble and he held in his hand a golden cup, from which he poured a libation. . . .

As they approached the precincts of the temple, he could hear the noise of the crowd.

"Quicker, Sallust. They're awaiting us."

Here was the entrance to the grove. The chariot stopped. They descended and entered.

A solitary figure in white was awaiting them on the steps of the temple—the old priest.

The crowd, invisible, was chanting something.

Julian felt a sudden chill. Approaching, he saw deep embarrassment on the old man's face: he held something tightly under his arm, something white—a bird—a goose.

Up the steps came the Supreme Pontiff. "What is this?" he asked tonelessly. "Why are you alone? Where are the people?"

The old man had tears in his eyes. "I don't know, Pontifex—no one has come—I'm all alone here."

"But that chanting?"

"Listen to it, Sire—"

He listened. A massed chorus was singing over there, beyond the softly stepped hill with the laurel bushes. The words were now clearly audible.

"'Oh God, the heathen are come into Thine inheritance; the holy temple have they defiled; they have laid Jerusalem on heaps. The dead bodies of Thy servants have they given to be meat unto the fowls of the heaven, the flesh of Thy saints unto the beasts of the earth. Their blood have they shed like water round about Jerusalem; and there was none to bury them. . . .'"

"The Galileans," whispered Julian. "Again, and always the Galileans—"

"Yes, Sire, they are transporting their dead away, as you ordered them—"

"'How long, Lord? wilt Thou be angry for ever? shall Thy jealousy burn like fire? Pour out Thy wrath upon the heathen that have not known Thee and upon the kingdoms; that have not called upon Thy name. . . .'"

"There they are, the brutes," growled Julian.

A vast multitude of people was streaming down the main alley leading to the gates; first came twelve sturdy men carrying the coffin of their martyred bishop—then all the clergy of the town; then the people—the procession seemed endless—

On went the relentless words of the Seventy-ninth Psalm of David: .

"'. . . Help us, O God of our salvation, for the glory of Thy name: and deliver us, and purge away our sins, for Thy name's sake. Wherefore should the heathen say, Where is their God? let him be known among the heathen in our sight by the revenging of the blood of Thy servants which is shed. . . .'"

Here he stood, the Supreme Pontiff, with one—one!—believer, carrying a poor goose as the sacrifice to Apollo. There they marched past him, in thousands—still clinging to their foul relics, dug up from putrefaction and dust—and they triumphed—

No, this was not the day to be Supreme Pontiff—it was the day to remind these wretches that he was the Emperor—

"'. . . Let the sighing of the prisoner come before Thee; according to the greatness of Thy power preserve Thou those that are appointed to die—'"

Yes, die you should; all of you, for your obstinate superstition, for this wilful negation of the truth—for the terrible blow you have dealt me, who wanted to lead you to heights of which you are not even allowed to dream.

Julian turned away. "Go home, old man," he said wearily. "You and your goose and I: it's not enough to placate the god after this—"

At the foot of the steps Sallust waited. He stood stiffly to attention and Julian appreciated the gesture.

"Come, Sallust. It's all over—for to-day."

Still, though from afar now, came the chanting of the procession.

"'. . . So we thy people and sheep of thy pasture will give thee thanks for ever; we will shew forth thy praise to all generations. . . .'"

The old priest was left alone. For a long time he stood on the temple steps, as though in a dream. This was to have been his great day, the day of days—

For over twenty years he had been waiting for it. He had almost forgotten the sacred words of the ritual; it had been painful enough to recollect them—the old brain had gone rusty and the thoughts did not want to come, as they used to. And this goose was all he had—bought with his last coins from a shrugging, contemptuous tradesman—no one had any respect left for the former priest of Apollo. What a moment it had been, when they came to him, and asked him to be a priest again. And now? The Supreme Pontiff had turned his back on him—he had despised the sacrifice of good will, and

so the gods were going to remain without it. Was there no hope left? He was supposed to have served as an acolyte at this occasion—the Supreme Pontiff himself would perform the ceremony. But he knew his words now—he had learnt them anew, all the words, not only those of the acolyte. And he *was* a priest, whatever the stupid neighbours might say—he was a priest!

He slunk back into the temple, the half-dead bird under his arm.

Everything here was prepared for the sacrifice—he had done it all himself. The flagon of wine, the cruse of holy oil, the heap of wood, the knife—it was all there.

Why not do it alone?—Smile at me, Apollo—smile at your priest, your old, faithful priest. They've all left me—even the Supreme Pontiff has left me. But I'm still here—and I am a priest.

You'll have your sacrifice, Apollo. You'll have it.

Now then—what's first? The fire—I must kindle a fire. . . .

CHAPTER XXXII

Returned, the Emperor shut himself in his study, with strict orders not to disturb him. Not even Oribasius dared to disregard the order. Callias was worried—the Emperor had not eaten a thing since breakfast. . . .

Shortly after midnight they had to disturb him after all.

Daphne was aflame.

No one knew how the fire had started, but the temple of Apollo was burning like a torch and a thick pall of smoke was hanging over the grove. . . .

Ghostly pale, Julian asked for Mardonius. "This is arson, no doubt," he said, trying to keep his voice under control. "Take all the troops you want, and all the police—find the guilty and arrest them."

The eunuch's eyes gleamed with satisfaction. "And then, Sire?"

"Then get me the truth—never mind how—but get me the truth."

Mardonius nodded. "You shall have it, Julian, my son. . . . The first thing I promised you was the truth—many years ago, in the grove near the monastery. I gave it to you; I shall give it to you again."

"Good."

"But—the Galileans? There is no doubt, as you said your-

self *they* have caused the fire. What are your general orders?"

"The cathedral of Antioch is to be closed. All its possessions are confiscated in the name of the State. Further measures will be considered."

"Thank you, Sire," said Mardonius, beaming, and he left in a hurry.

A gloomy day followed the night of the fire. By noon Mardonius reported the arrest of hundreds, including almost the entire clergy of the town. The treasure of the cathedral turned out to be negligible—it seemed evident that the best things were missing. Obviously the priests, expecting punishment for their crime, had buried the most valuable objects somewhere. Several of them had been tortured in the hope of extracting the secret from them. They had not confessed.

Julian bit his lip. "That things like that should be necessary under my rule, Mardonius—"

"Justice is the Emperor's first duty," said the eunuch coldly.

"I know—but it is sad."

"Most suspect is a presbyter of the name of Theodoretus. Three witnesses have seen him sneaking around in the vicinity of Daphne. Besides, we found him in the cathedral, trying to hide the golden chalice from the altar. He must be very severely punished."

Julian nodded. "Send the judgment of the court to me as soon as it is ready. If he is guilty, I shall sign it, even if it's death."

Mardonius hesitated for a moment—then he bowed and left and the Emperor returned to the library, where he had spent most of the morning.

He found Callias waiting for him at the door. "Someone's come to see you, Sire," he said in a curiously uncertain voice.

Julian gave him a surprised look. "Someone? What someone? Who is it?"

"A—an old man, Sire—a monk, I believe—he asked me where he could wait for you, and I—I thought—"

Callias, thoroughly flustered, withdrew hastily.

Julian shook his head. Callias was getting queer. A monk? Here, in the Palace?

A tall man stood at the other end of the room, dressed in the long, brown hermit's robe: his hair and beard were silver-grey. Now he turned round and Julian saw a huge, sunburnt forehead and eyes of a brilliance that seemed to lighten the room.

"Who are you?" asked the Emperor.

"I am Athanasius."

I knew it, thought Julian. It is incredible,—it is the most

impossible of all things—but I knew it. The effrontery of it . . .

Slowly he walked towards the tall man who stood motionless and did not even make an attempt to bow.

Julian knew he had to gain time, in order to recover. For this was the enemy—the worst, the most dangerous enemy of all; the man who symbolised in his person the whole of the Galilean creed: had not the council of Nicæa, thirty-seven years ago, accepted this very man's formulation of what Galileans had to believe? Thirty-seven years ago—that was five years before he, Julian, was born. . . . Ah, but he was the Emperor now, and this man was an exile, chased out of his diocese on the Emperor's command. . . .

No, that did not help at all. I mustn't make myself believe anything—not now. This man can be beaten only by the truth.

This is the hour of battle—and he mustn't succeed with his surprise tactics. Athanasius—I owe you much, don't I?

Thrice banned under three emperors—are you going to live for ever, as your name prophesies? Wait—despite your surprise, I'll attack first. . . .

"You are just in time, Athanasius—in fact, your visit could not come at a more opportune moment. Your Galileans have burnt the temple of Apollo and the sacred groves of Daphne: are you coming to make amends for them? Or have these wretches acted on your personal instigation?"

Athanasius did not speak. But Julian thought he saw, at the corner of his mouth the faintest shadow of a contemptuous smile. He was not sure of it, but it irritated him beyond all reason.

"You must admit," he continued, angrily, "that storms are breaking wherever you appear—that last tempest of yours, in Egypt, was too much even for my long-enduring patience. I had to exile you once more. And what happened? My reports tell me that you stayed in Egypt in direct disobedience of my order. As before, under the Emperor Constantius, you chose to travel about and to make surprise appearances in various towns and places. And now you have the effrontery to come to me, into my very room. What prevents me from having you arrested on the spot?"

"Your conscience."

Julian waited. He had expected a lengthy answer; explanations, accusations, perhaps. But all he got were those two words. So he resumed:

"I suppose I should be flattered that you still expect me to have a conscience. When I read the orations of Bishop Gregory of Nazianzen—my former fellow-student in Athens—I

began to doubt whether I ever had one. According to him, I'm not even human, but a demon, or at least possessed of demons."

Again that faint, faint shadow of a contemptuous smile. But no answer.

Julian blushed with anger. "Speak, man—why have you come here?"

"For the sake of your soul."

The Emperor threw his head back and laughed. "My soul in good keeping, priest. I am not one of your sheep."

"Your soul like mine belongs to God. You are baptised—therefore you are a Christian."

"I, a Christian? You are mad."

"You are a Christian—much as you try to kick against the pricks."

But now Julian felt that he had the measure of his enemy.

"Reiteration is bad dialectics, priest."

"I know nothing of dialectics," said Athanasius, "but I do know the truth, because I know Christ. . . . Christ, who is your Master in heaven, though you have betrayed Him, just as you betrayed the Emperor, your master on earth."

Very pale, Julian said: "You must be tired of your life, to speak to me like that."

"It is the truth," said Athanasius simply. "I have spoken the truth all my life—to beggars and to emperors."

"Constantine and Constantius were both of your faith—at least more or less," jeered Julian. "There were certain subtle differences, if I remember rightly, but I am not of your faith, which I despise. I have my own belief, and I am the Supreme Pontiff of it."

"You are pontiff and community in one," said Athanasius. "That is, you are dreaming of a non-existent spiritual kingdom of your own—a mere phantom of your own imagination, born of the half-knowledge of Ephesian mystics. How many people do you think, are sharing what you call belief?"

"The whole world will share it," cried Julian.

"Not one soul," said Athanasius quietly. "Though some may pretend to do so, to flatter you and to further their own ends . . . and though others may play with it, a curious and dangerous fascination. And why? Because the things you dream about are beyond the limits of the human mind, and without a bridge to our soul. They can never fasten in a human heart; not without belief in Christ. Yours is a house without a foundation. I ask you: where is the spirit of your religion? The new spirit that makes a new map? Christ has given us the eternal present of His love. He died for us, and to-day, three centuries later, we are ready to die for Him—

and so we shall be in another three centuries, and beyond, till the last day. Whilst we are speaking, men are dying for Christ—men for whose lives you are responsible. You have killed many and you may kill more. But you will not win one single soul—though you may lose your own. We are not in danger—you are. That is why I have come to you."

Julian clenched his hands. "You mistake your position, Athanasius. I take full responsibility for my actions. You dared to speak of my—disobedience to Constantius, who, once, as you say, was my master on earth. But have you not disobeyed me? I ordered you to leave Egypt, didn't I? And you stayed on."

"You are not my Master," said Athanasius curtly. "You never will be. You won this throne through perjury."

"Priest!"

"You know it is the truth. And why—why did you break your oath? Fear of your life, when your mutinous soldiers threatened you? Perhaps—but I don't think so. You are not a coward—in *these things*."

"What do you mean?" asked Julian furiously.

"Your motive, I believe, from your dabblings with what you do not understand, was that you were chosen by some deity or other—that you were the favourite of the gods—their instrument. Was it really *their* greatness that you cared for? Could it be so? Did they need you for their greatness, then? The powerful gods and goddesses of Olympus—were they in need of this bit of dust, called Julian? Or—were you, in need, in dire need of them, to uphold you, to give you—in your own eyes—a *right* to rebellion? Voices spoke perhaps—memories—dreams—"

"Quiet," whispered Julian. "Be still, you—"

"But did you trouble to examine yourself? Did you ask yourself: can this be true? Was it the very core of your being that decided: yes, I must act like this! Or—did you give in to the demon of vainglory? Tell me—have you saved your gods for their sake—or for yours?"

Silence. Then: "I hate you," said Julian between his teeth. "I hate you and your Christ and all he stands for. You miserable hypocrites. The truth! Love is written on your banner—and for love's sake you commit the most dastardly crimes. Have not your sects fought each other more bestially than any savage tribes? Wouldn't they do so again, if I did not prevent it with the utmost severity of the law?"

The Archbishop's face showed a deep sadness. "You attack—because you cannot defend yourself. But be it so. Yes—blood has been shed, and will be shed, perhaps for many centuries to come. Too deep is the disease of humanity that

it can be cured within a short time. The wild passions of man can be projected on anything and can pervert even love into hatred—for a while. Poor fools—their lesson will take a long time to learn. Christ's words are clear enough and yet they are misunderstood by many. Don't you see that we must fight the enemy within even harder than the enemy without? There are many bad men, even bad priests in our own ranks, and there will be more. But the core, the Church itself, will remain intact: leaves and even branches will fall off a tree or be cut off—but the tree will stand. Did they teach you so little in your monastery at Macellum, that you do not even know that the church is the Mystic Body of Christ? When the hands of ignorant soldiers drove nails through His beloved hands and feet, tearing His flesh and shedding His blood—did not His body remain His body? As He lives—we shall. He promised it—and there is nothing safer in heaven and on earth. The follies of mankind are terrible. Their very virtues, their very spirit they will turn to their own destruction.

"Verily, I tell you, the time will come, when mankind, prostrate with grief over its own follies, will cry out that Christianity has failed them—even then they will not see that it was they who have failed Christ! A thousand false prophets will try to satisfy them—Christ Himself has warned us that this will happen. But there is only one truth and one salvation.

"In all that flood of misery and deception we shall stand like a rock.

"Aye, even in millennia nothing will vanquish us, though many will try and in many ways. Even the gates of hell will not prevail against us. For with us, despite all our weakness, is Love, the love of God, ready for the asking.

"The time will come when Mass is said all over the earth, at every moment—when Christ will be with us in flesh and blood, morning, noon and night. Only then can there be peace—within and without."

Julian felt as though the air itself had become as heavy as lead—as in a dream, when iron weights are pressing on every limb just when one must run, run for one's life.

With an immense effort he said:

"Unfortunately I haven't the time to wait for your millennium—I am responsible to the gods for the time of my own rule. And I have little patience with a religion of love whose disciples sow hatred. As for the promises of Christ: you should read what I have written against your doctrine. I've proved my case, without a shred of doubt. But, I forgot: you are the man of blind faith. The proof of reason means little, if anything to you. Very well then—you will see how I shall

give the lie to your Galilean! Did he not say that the temple of the Jews was destroyed for good? Little did he know that I, Julian, would have it rebuilt, just as it was—to spite him.”

Athanasius shook his head. “You will not succeed,” he said. “You can’t. What is the poor little hatred of an apostate against God’s love? And is it hatred at all? Are you not really trying—desperately—to conceal from yourself that you have never *quite* given up the faith of your childhood? Are you not, in true reality, fleeing from Christ’s love?”

“How dare you say that,” screamed Julian, beside himself!

“Fleeing all the time,” repeated Athanasius. “And thus, poor man, you have never been loved—not even by your wife.”

Speechless, Julian stared at the giant old man whose eyes seemed to look right through him into space.

“She did not love you—she loved power—as you do,” said the relentless voice. “For power’s sake she ruined the life of your child, and her own—just as you are ruining yours.”

“How—do you—know?” The Emperor’s voice was failing him.

“I know because I was with her when she died. I buried your child.”

There was deep pity in Athanasius’ eyes now.

“Do not despair,” he said gently. “She died in peace with our Lord—and so great is His goodness that it may still happen to you, too. . . .”

He nodded, and left the room.

Julian stood motionless. And then he felt that the walls came up towards him—nearer and nearer—his legs gave way under him and he fell in a dead faint.

“I must see the Emperor at once,” said Mardonius.

“Impossible—” Oribasius shook his head—“no one can see him. He is ill.”

“Is he conscious?”

“Heavens, yes. But—”

“Then I must see him. Out of the way, physician.”

Oribasius found himself stumbling against the wall and the eunuch entered.

Julian was sitting in an armchair at his desk, with a cushion stuffed behind his head. He looked strained and there were dark rings round his eyes.

“Mardonius? What is it?”

“I’ve had reports that Athanasius is in town! He’s been seen by two of my most reliable men. Very likely he is behind the Daphne fire. If we’re lucky we may be able to get some evidence—I’m practically certain that I could get it.

Then we can hang this arch-enemy of the gods at the cross of the cathedral."

"Yes?"

"My men are combing the city—he can't escape us, rest assured, Sire. Now here is the judgment of the court about the men arrested yesterday. . . ."

"So quickly? I can't read all this now, Mardonius."

"Of course not, Sire. Just sign this one document, 'agreeing with the findings of the court and their decisions—' "

"I can't agree with something I don't know of, can I?"

The eunuch was hurt. "I'm trying to save you time and trouble, Sire. . . ."

"Yes, yes, I know, but—what is the verdict? Are they guilty?"

"Naturally, Sire."

"All of them?"

"All of them, Sire. But as the court is aware of the Emperor's love of clemency, only one has been condemned to death: Theodoretus."

"I don't want him to lie," said the Emperor wearily. "After all—he didn't try to hide that chalice out of greed—what would you have done in his position, Mardonius?"

"I am not in his position and I never could be, Sire," said the eunuch. With a hard stare he added: "Theodoretus is dead anyway, Sire. He did not survive the questioning under torture."

Julian's hands twitched. "*Must* you create martyrs, Mardonius?"

Sallust entered hurriedly. "Emperor, the fire of Daphne—ah, you are here, Mardonius—have you told the Emperor?"

The eunuch was pale now. "Told him what?" he rasped.

"That it wasn't the Galileans who set fire to Daphne?"

"What—did you say?" stammered Julian. "Not the Galileans? Who else?"

"That old priest—the priest of Apollo; he must have tried to perform the sacrifice alone. He lit the fire, and it must have got out of control. His charred remains were found in the temple."

"You had no business at Daphne, Tribune," said Mardonius hoarsely. "I am in charge of this matter."

Sallust stared at him. "We are both the Emperor's servants, Mardonius," he said, "but it seems as though we have different conceptions of our duties. Whatever your object may be—I want the Emperor to know the truth."

"It is well," Julian managed to say. "I am pleased with you, Sallust. Leave us now."

The Tribune saluted, turned sharply and clanked out of the room.

"Mardonius—how long have you known this?"

The eunuch hesitated.

"You knew it in time to stop them from behaving like beasts towards innocent men—did you?"

"No Galilean is innocent, Sire."

"They may be wrong in their beliefs—deluded—led astray; but the rules of justice still apply to them—just as much as to the highest ranking priest of Jupiter. You have done grave wrong, Mardonius, and history will put your guilt and folly on my shoulders. It is my name, not yours, that will be cursed for your deed—your shameful deed, Mardonius."

All the blood flushed into the eunuch's face. "Who is that speaking?" he said almost contemptuously. "Emperor Julian, the renewer of the gods—or Pontius Pilate, washing his hands of innocent blood?"

"Mardonius!"

"Yes, Sire—if Theodoretus was innocent, then the Galilean himself was, too. Either this wretched doctrine, pernicious to the Empire and mankind is stamped out—or it will stamp us out. There is no peace between the fire of the Sun and the water of baptism. Therefore Theodoretus was guilty and had to die. Maybe that old priest of Apollo did set fire to Daphne, and maybe he didn't. Who cares? The fire must serve us, not the Galileans: that is where my duty lies, and yours, Sire."

"Don't you tell me what is my duty," said Julian sharply. "You forget yourself, Mardonius."

"It is you who forget, Sire," cried the eunuch, "and therefore I shall remind you where you would be if it hadn't been for me—in that house of spiritual idiocy, the monastery of Macellum. I rescued you—I brought to you the wisdom of Plato and Plotinus—I reared you, at the danger of my life—I worked ceaselessly, to make Constantius acknowledge you—I spread your name among the population of the Empire so that people in the farthest provinces were looking to you as to their liberator. Do you think all this could be done in sweet innocence? It's all very well for you who were carried there by my efforts—you could afford to play the pure soul, undefiled by anything. I knew your reticence, your scruples and your fears—so I did all that had to be done, in silence, so that you could guard your precious innocence. I'm ready to take the blame for it, if blame there is—but not from you, for whom I did it. Why, even your very acceptance of the purple—"

He stopped. He knew, suddenly, that he had gone too far. "Go on," said Julian, "say it, man—or is it you now who is afraid—as well you might be?"

The eunuch laughed. "Fear is something I have yet to learn, Sire."

"Even my acceptance of the purple," repeated Julian. "Even that was due to you and your efforts, was it?"

Their eyes met.

"It was a woman's voice, I heard, Mardonius—and she poke of Achilles—"

The Emperor rose with difficulty—there was no doubt that he was ill. "You were the man who told me of my mother's dream," he said, "the dream that she was giving birth to Achilles—I know that from you—no one else ever told me and I never saw the physician, who—as you said—told you about it. And you were in Paris, that day when I took the purple. Who was the woman, crying for Achilles, Mardonius?"

"She is dead, Sire," said the eunuch sombrely. "She died soon afterwards."

Their eyes were fighting a merciless duel.

"Why don't you ask how Constantius died," whispered the eunuch. "Such a wonderful coincidence, wasn't it?—just at the right moment, to ensure your bloodless victory. I asked you for high office for General Theolaiphus, didn't I? It was granted most graciously. An Emperor will always do well to consider services of the highest order—"

Julian staggered back. "Helio:—you know I never wanted that—you know it—"

"It is done—because it had to be done," said Mardonius stonily.

Once more Julian looked at the most terrible of his servants.

"Lies and crimes," he said almost inaudibly. "From the beginning to the end—lies and crimes."

He pointed to the door. "Go, Mardonius—go, wherever you want. But never let me see your face again."

For a moment the eunuch looked as though he could not believe what he heard. He seemed to be searching for words.

But that frail young man in front of him was no longer the monk of Macellum. He was the man who had led armies to victory; he was the Emperor; and suddenly the eunuch knew—knew for certain—that one more word would mean his instantaneous death.

Silently he bowed and left. He walked past Salust who very much wanted to tell him what he thought of him and

could not utter a single word when he saw the eunuch's face.

Mardonius reached his own suite, where Hiempsal was waiting for him.

"You—back already? Have you found Athanasius?"

"Yes, Master," said the giant Nubian. "I found him."

"He's dead, then?"

"No, Master."

Mardonius' eyes became slit. "Report, you dog—"

"I found him near the Orontes, speaking to some friends. It was not far from the little port. His friends were worried and I heard him say: 'Be of good cheer—it is only a passing cloud and will soon be over.'"

Mardonius nodded grimly. "We shall see," he said between his teeth. "And then—what happened?"

"He went on."

"Alone?"

"Yes, Master."

"You followed him, of course."

"Yes, Master."

"By Hades—must I draw the words out of you, one by one? You had your orders and they were clear enough. He was alone then, wasn't he?"

"Yes, Master—I—I went up to him and said: 'You are Athanasius, the Bishop?'—and he turned round and he looked at me and he—"

"Will you go on, you dog—?"

"He raised his hand and made a gesture with it—like this.—and he smiled. Then he went on."

"But you? Why—"

"I—I couldn't move, Master. I don't know how it was—I had no thought in my head—he just looked at me like that—like a father—and then he went on and was gone—"

The Nubian swayed a little.

Mardonius grasped a whip; it was made of heavy ox leather and its many thongs were edged with lead; he raised it and hit the Nubian across the face with all his strength.

Hiempsal sunk on his knees; with both hands he covered the place where his eyes had been; a high, whining little noise came from his bleeding lips.

Mardonius turned away in disgust. "Get out," he rasped.

He heard the quick steps and turned round—but it was too late.

The powerful hands of the giant Nubian pressed his throat, pressed.

When a servant entered, several minutes later, he found Hiempsal sitting on the floor, his hand still cramped round Mardonius' throat.

He was still uttering that high whining little noise when they led him away to the inevitable fate of the slave who has killed his master.

CHAPTER XXXIII

They ran like the wind, the wild asses of the Arabian hills—they were out of sight, long before the column of men appeared on the horizon—the endless column of men, dragging their feet through the merciless, burning-hot sand.

The Roman army was in retreat.

In retreat, after a series of victories unparalleled in three centuries of war between Rome and Persia. They had done the impossible. Their pockets and bags were full of gold and precious stones—but they would have given them all for one square meal. Their breasts were bedecked with the metal discs of valour—but they would have sold them for one night's undisturbed sleep. Every morsel of food was measured to them by the quartermasters, and every night came the fierce, harassing riders of the desert who attacked like lightning and then vanished like ghosts.

There was no wood with which to build a fortified camp. Not even palm trees would grow in this godforsaken part of the world.

They were tired, thirsty, exhausted.

Sixty-five thousand men had set out—many, many months ago—the finest army Rome had ever sent against Persia, and under the leadership of a man who had never lost a battle in his life and whose incredible luck was proverbial.

Nor had Julian underestimated the enemy he had set out to conquer. In his own book, *The Cæsars*, he made Alexander reproach Cæsar for belittling his victories against the Persians, who had beaten Crassus and Marc Antonv. And the preparations had been as methodical as they had been extensive. His plan, so carefully worked out in Antioch, had been excellent. But something had gone wrong;

The magnificent days, when the vast army deployed along the Tigris—and suddenly wheeled right to reach and cross the Euphrates instead, on more than a thousand ships, secretly built. Then they left the last bulwark of Rome, Ctesium, behind and marched into the strange land of the Assyrians with its countless canals, fertilising the earth.

They had opened their dykes and flooded their own land,

these Assyrians—and yet Julian marched on and reached the fortress of Perisabor—and stormed it; his battering ram burst open the iron-bound gates and his helepolis, a fighting turret, was wheeled towards the giant walls, and as the very first, the Emperor jumped down on the wall, sword in hand—and thus Perisabor fell.

Next was Maogamalcha, the fortress regarded as impregnable—impossible even to get near the walls, so well was it defended.

So they undermined it, and took it from inside—and Maogamalcha fell, despite its sixteen monstrous towers and the heroism of its defenders, before the “fire-spitting lion,” as the Persians now called the terrible invader.

Onward to Ctesiphon, the enemy's capital. The Persians had erected a barrier of stone across the canal, on which the Roman fleet approached. Julian dug up the bed of another, once used by the Emperor Trajan and now dried out—and the flood of the Euphrates was let in and carried the fleet over to the Tigris, which the army crossed at night, although the enemy held the opposite bank in strength, with archers, heavy cavalry and even elephants. The Romans beat them and in their pursuit reached the very outskirts of Ctesiphon. The siege of the capital started.

And then came the first of the many fateful pieces of news; the reinforcements from Armenia did not arrive. King Arsaces Tiranus of Armenia had gone over to the enemy. . . .

It was impossible to lay siege to a city of the size of Ctesiphon without them. But retreat? With an army victorious everywhere?

Never. There must be another way, a way to final, decisive victory.

And there was. By-pass the city and march straight into the very heart of the enemy land. Force him to give battle in the open. . . .

That was what Alexander would have done. That was what Julian did.

He had to burn his fleet, of course, lest it fall into the enemy's hands. It went up in flames, and with it most of the stores which could not be carried along the road in this wild, unheard-of adventure.

The army would have to live on the land of the enemy.

But the enemy scorched the earth. Only ravaged, desolate, burnt-out territory fell into Roman hands. Treacherous

guides lured them along roads deeper and deeper into the desert.

And retreat became dire necessity.

Everything, everything a military leader may dare in Persia—but not a retreat.

As soon as the Persian knows that he has the whip hand, his fighting spirit rises tenfold.

The army in retreat had not a day's, not a night's rest.

Parthians, Saracens, Arabian cavalry attacked like clouds of locusts—and disappeared, only to come back a few hours later.

For days they had been marching in the wrong direction, misled again by traitors, until they were found out, and now, at last, the army was on the way towards the province of Corduene and safety. . . .

The army—or rather, what was left of it.

"Another three days—four, if it's as much—and we are safe," said General Nevitta. The war council was short. The Emperor, usually so eloquent, had scarcely spoken at all. As soon as it was over, he withdrew into his tent, where he had his daily hour's discussion with Maximus. The mystic had been with him from the very beginning of the campaign. But even he could not dispel the deep melancholy of the Emperor to-night.

"I am weary, Maximus—tired of it all. In three, four days we shall be safe in Corduene, says Nevitta. He only thinks in terms of days. But after Corduene, Maximus—what? Back to Antioch? To see the jeering faces of the Galileans—and they will jeer, Maximus, trust them for that."

"A retreat is not a defeat, Sire."

"They will interpret it as such. And I'm no longer the man I was, Maximus. No, do not smile. I know I'm only thirty-two, but the favourites of the gods die early, don't they?"

"Cæsar lived to be fifty-six and might have lived to be seventy, had he listened to his astrologer's warning."

"Alexander died at my age, and so did—he. My greatest, greatest enemy. The carpenter's son. And as for Cherubael always say, I would not live long? I tell you, Maximus, my luck has gone."

"You must not think that, Sire, or else your thought will transform itself into fact."

"My thought was born of fact. My luck has gone, ever since I saw . . . that man. He did not fight me on my own grounds—he tore into my mind and ravaged it as we did the land of the Assyrians. It wasn't a fight between him and me

at all; it became a fight between me and myself and he directed it. He's wrong, of course. He must be. But, when I saw Mardonius, the morning after, I could not help comparing the two men—" The Emperor shuddered. "And then, three days after Mardonius' death, came the news of that earthquake in Jerusalem—"

"You mustn't think of these things now, Sire—"

"It's strange, though, Maximus, isn't it? An earthquake—quite suddenly, and all my work to rebuild the Jewish temple destroyed, even those last stones that had withstood the destruction under Vespasian, went. Instead of giving the Galilean the lie, I have confirmed his prophecy. Strange . . ."

"The gods permit strange things at times—besides, it is always wrong to act solely in order to disprove something. Your action—though an actual construction—had a negative purpose."

"Perhaps you're right. I don't know."

"Certainly your luck has been in, since, Sire. All your victories in these last months—"

"Ah, but this war is the decisive issue, Maximus. I've always regarded it as that. It's not only the war between Rome and Persia. It is my war—and Helios' war—against the Galilean. The final judgment will be given by history. Go now, friend. I'd like to try and sleep. . . ." He smiled. "Hypnos was never my favourite god—I've treated him rather badly, most of my life, so I can't very well complain if he deserts me now. Good night, Maximus."

"Good night, Sire."

Julian awoke. The tent was so dark that he knew it was still night.

In his mind the silvery cocoon of the dream world dissolved; but one thing remained: a figure, the figure of a man, standing at the entrance. He could not see his features, a dark veil was drawn over his face, a funeral veil. But he knew with a great and terrifying certainty that the features under the veil were his own.

Slowly he rose and walked towards it. It did not move, and yet the distance between them did not diminish. Now he had left the tent, and the figure was still there, quiet, motionless. Yes, it was still night and the stars were shining, just as on that night in Paris, he thought.

In that very moment a meteor shot across the sky like a fiery arrow and disappeared, and with it the silent, veiled figure.

Then Julian knew that he was going to die.

The attack came just before noon, when they were on the march through hilly country. Julian was riding with the vanguard; he was unarmed.

"It's much too hot for armour to-day."

When the news came that the rearguard had been attacked, he gave orders to the light cavalry to follow him, snatched shield and sword from one of his aides and galloped back. He found that the rear, under Dagalaiphus and Sallust, had already undertaken counter action, and his own intervention drove the enemy back over the hills.

Then came the report about the attack against the vanguard. On the way there he saw the first waves of still another attack forming against the centre of the left column. The dust clouds of cavalry were visible and over there also the giant grey forms of elephants, the most dreaded weapon of the Persian army—they were almost invulnerable and nothing seemed to be able to stop the dynamic power of their onslaught.

But once more the genius of their leader saved the situation for the Romans. The best marksmen of every cohort concentrated the hail of their missiles against the legs of the elephants. At twenty yards their attack was halted. With their living vehicles immobilised, the drivers in their enormous baskets on the backs could be dealt with, and now the very bodies of the elephants were used as a barricade against the cavalry.

Julian's own light cavalry rushed into the enemy's right flank, and the Persians fled.

"Chase," ordered Julian. "Give the signal, Tuba—we must hold these hills."

"Your armour, Sire—put it on."

"No, friend—if the gods want me to win, they—"

He saw it coming, the volley of arrows and light javelins, thrown back by the Parthian riders in full flight.

"Sire—!"

Julian tried to draw the javelin from his side—but the blade was over a foot long, it cut into his fingers. . . .

"Hold him, he's falling—"

"Why, it's the Emperor—"

"Shut up, you fool—help me to get him out of here—"

"Gently now—"

"Take over, Tribune—get your men to pitch a tent and draw a cordon around it—"

"Yes, Legate."

"His physician is over there with the Twenty-fifth—have him fetched at once."

"Yes, Legate."

"Come on, you—ten thousand Persian swine for the life of the Emperor—follow me!"

The shadows dispersed. A tent . . . but we've been on the march, and—

Julian sat up with a jerk. "My horse! My sword! I must—"

He sank back with a groan.

"Quiet now, Sire," said a familiar voice. The face of Oribasius, pale and drawn.

"The battle, Oribasius—"

"The battle is won, Sire. The enemy has fled."

Julian smiled. But then a tearing, ravenous pain screamed in his left side and for a moment all was blurred. Victory, he thought. But I must die. . . . And Oribasius heard him mutter with a grim vehemence:

"Thou hast conquered, Galilean."

The physician cried like a child.

In the evening they all came: Nevitta and Dagalaiphus, Sallust, who had narrowly escaped death himself, Jovian, the commander of the Guards—and Maximus. The little tent was full. Nevitta gave his Emperor a short report. Yes, it was victory. The Persians had abandoned the field and lost their two leading generals, Meranes and Nohordates, fifty satraps and many thousands of men.

Julian nodded. He knew now that the army would be able to reach Corduene in safety. Then he spoke to his comrades-in-arms—even now he could not let the opportunity for a speech pass by—and the sentence with which he started was thought out and polished, as though he had prepared it for a lecture in Athens.

"Friends and fellow-soldiers, the seasonable period of my departure has now arrived, and I discharge with the cheerfulness of a ready debtor, the demands of Nature. I have learnt from philosophy how much the soul is more excellent than the body; and that the separation of the nobler substance should be the subject of joy rather than affliction; I have learnt from religion that an early death has often been the reward of piety, and I accept, as a favour of the gods, the mortal stroke. . . ."

He went on, saying that he died without remorse . . . that the happiness of the people had been the aim of his government—he offered his thanks to the gods for being allowed to die in battle, instead of by the cruelty of a tyrant, the dagger of the conspirator or the slow tortures of lingering disease. No, he would not influence their suffrages in the elec-

tion of a new emperor. "My choice might be imprudent or injudicious; and if it should not be ratified by the consent of the army, it might be fatal to the person whom I should recommend. I shall only, as a good citizen, express my hope that the Romans may be blessed with the government of a worthy sovereign." His tone, as he spoke, was both firm and gentle. There was no word about the fate of the State religion he had introduced. He then asked them to listen to his testament as a soldier, and his words were fully valid, as, according to Roman law, a soldier on active service could make an oral will.

"He's magnificent," murmured the stolid Nevitta: he saw with some embarrassment that almost everyone was in tears. Julian saw it too.

"You are wrong, friends," he said. "Why cry? In a few moments I shall be united with heaven and the stars. Won't I, Maximus?"

And to the dull, but reverent astonishment of the military, he entered into a metaphysical argument with Maximus, on the nature of the soul.

To Oribasius' warning not to exert his strength, he replied: "I won't have much more opportunity to speak—"

Then his wound began to bleed again and breathing became difficult.

"Water," he said, with an effort. Oribasius held the goblet to his lips. Cool. Cool. Enough . . .

Thankful to—the gods—happy—of the people—good—speech—

From far away the voice of Oribasius. What did he say?—

There was a wave of lamentation—crying—

Metal—noise—salute—to the dead Emperor—good fools—I'm not dead—don't you see I'm not? One is praying—that's Oribasius—good fool—praying—

They have—closed—my eyes—I'm stuck here—in—the mire.

Where is—the Sun?

Longing—for what?

And thus, poor man, you have never been loved.

Never been loved— Could not defend—all attack—in vain.

You live—and live—and I could never—grasp you—

Happiness? — tears — tears — hatred — wrong. Lies and crimes—

I mustn't flee—never flee—

"Come, Oribasius," said Sallust gently. "There is nothing man can do."

The tent was empty now, but for the body, covered by a purple cloak.

"Leave me here for a while, friend—I—I must stay a little longer."

Sallust left, and the physician went on praying silently, as before.

Hell—hell—the very darkness is longing for light—where is the Sun—the true—Sun?—I'm blind—

Abandon thine own will—and there will be no hell—

Who said that? Where are you? Longing—

Immeasurable, infinite light. You? You? Hæ· it been you, then, after all—and you—know me? Where have you been—that I did not see you before? In the midst—of my heart?

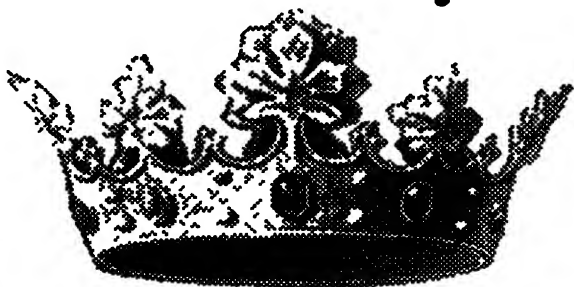
The soldiers were watching in silence, as four aquilifers, with their eagles wrapped in black veils, marched into the tent, to take over the death-watch. "He was a damned good soldier, but he persecuted Christ," murmured a young legionary. "Do you think he's in hell now, Marcus?"

"Dunno, son. I know very little of these things. But we have an old priest at home, and he always said: 'Trust Him—He's good beyond anything you can imagine—' "

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